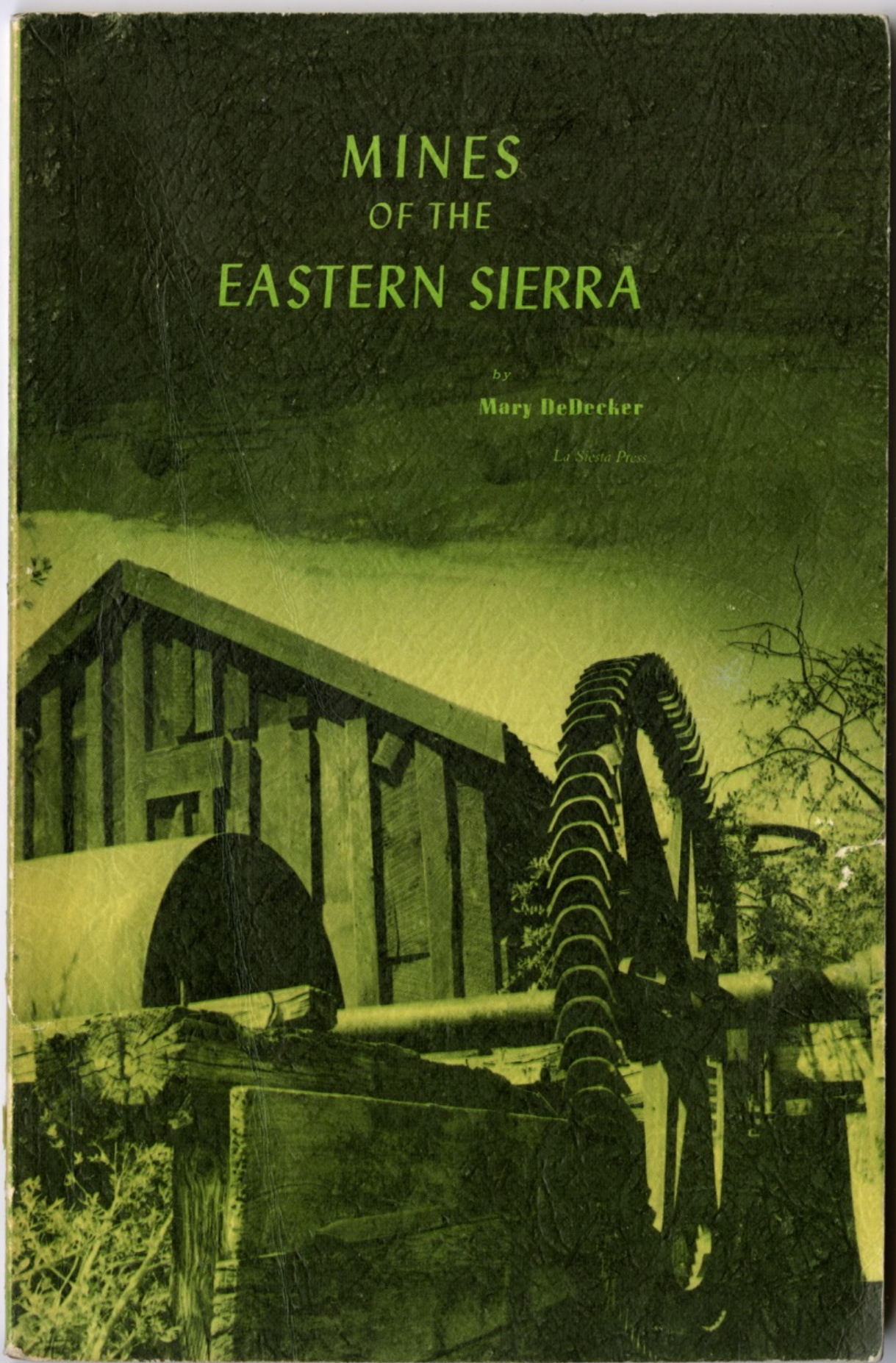
MINES OF THE EASTERN SIERRA

by

Mary DeDecker

La Siesta Press



MINES
of the
EASTERN SIERRA

MINES OF THE EASTERN SIERRA

Mary DeDecker

La Siesta Press
GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
1966

CALIFORNIA MINES SERIES

Pat Adler
MINERAL KING GUIDE

Ronald Dean Miller
MINES OF THE HIGH DESERT

Copyright © 1966 by

La Siesta Press
Box 406
Glendale, California, 91209
PRINTED IN U. S. A.

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Dogtown & Monoville	15
Homer District	17
Tioga	21
Prescott	23
Benton (Blind Springs, White Peak, Indian & Clover Patch Districts)	25
Lake District (Mammoth Lakes)	29
Coso	37
Russ & Inyo Districts	41
Beveridge	49
Kearsarge	53
Cerro Gordo	57
References	69
Index	71

CRADLE-ROCKING.

CRADLE-ROCKING, woodcut of 1872
from La Siesta Collection

Introduction

THE EASTERN SIERRA was a harsh land at the time of the '49ers. That great wave of fortune seekers which swept westward over the crest avoided some 200 precipitous miles of this great barrier, as they sought out the most favorable routes.

The brown mountains and bitter valleys paralleling the Sierra Nevada on the east were known to only a few early explorers and trappers. That beauty and wealth might be found on that side was no concern to those first eager Argonauts who rushed to claim their shares of California's gold. They just could not afford to hesitate.

Within a decade, the backwash of that wave was to flow over and around the Sierra, as restless men who had missed their pots of gold sought out new bonanzas. Mexicans came too, from the south, still feeling some claim on this land which their country had so recently been forced to cede to the United States. Their own quest for silver in the southwest had dated back to the days of the Spaniards' conquest. Perhaps this background and their understanding of desert country were factors in Mexicans locating some of the greatest producers in the area.

Gold madness lost little of its intensity as it spread eastward, and silver and other minerals were sought out as wealth producers too. New camps sprung up almost overnight, many existing on little more than hope, courage and excitement. Rumors were rampant. Glorious reports appearing in newspapers of the day predicted a fabulous future for each new strike. The fact that many mines of the eastern Sierra were relatively isolated or inaccessible seemed to lend enchantment. The very momentum of a booming mining camp seemed to overcome any and all obstacles, at least for a time. If the mine did produce, there was the additional challenge of getting ore reduced and bullion transported.

Placer mining was first in popularity in the earliest days. Anybody could afford a gold pan or could rig up a dry washer, and there was little loss if the claim proved barren.

Companies with money to invest could operate on a larger scale using equipment for hydraulic mining. But rich placer areas were limited and, in time, exhausted. The best known mines were lode claims, with their shafts and tunnels and dumps as enduring evidence of their development. The fact that expensive equipment was required for any extensive operation of lode claims led to mining companies and the promoters who created them. Financiers in the east seemed eager to have a part in the frenzied activity out west, often investing astonishing amounts on little more than a promoter's vivid imagination. Prospectors staked out claims with the hope of selling out to some company.

In contrast to the promoters and camp followers who created the frantic rushes to new bonanzas were the quiet mining men who were content to work their claims in a small way on a long range basis. Their mines have not made a splash in history, but they provided independence and a reasonably good living for many an individualist.

When California became a state in 1850, it was hardly prepared to govern its far outposts. Certainly it was not too much concerned with its eastern border beyond the Sierra barrier. Mariposa and Tulare, and later Fresno, counties stretched over to take in the area covered in this book, but there was no attempt to furnish any civil control. Each mining camp, largely populated by people who were there to escape restrictions, was responsible for its own procedures of law and order. These were as loose and varied as they were colorful.

Mining districts were organized in each new region, the boundaries being established by members of the district. Officers were elected and rules and regulations adopted, including provisions for registering and transferring mining claims. When Congress enacted a general mining law, it was to legalize what was already common practice and to establish some uniformity. A copy of the Act of May 10, 1872 was used as a guide in each district. Local laws still governed, however, when not in conflict with the rather broad provisions of the United States law. To this day there is considerable variance within the state of California. Mineral rights took precedence over any other claim on the land, and provisions were enacted for patenting mining claims, by which procedure the owner gained actual title to the land.

Mono County was established in 1861. The prosperous town of Aurora, its chief reason for existence, was made the county seat. What a cruel blow it was to that county to find, by a later survey of the state line, that its courthouse was

three miles over the line on the Nevada side. After two and one-half years of occupancy, during which the citizens of Aurora voted for two sets of county officials, one in each state, Mono County finally yielded to the fickle line. Its recorder and treasurer picked up the county records and funds, leaving the bills, and moved across to Bodie until a special election in the spring of 1864 determined a new county seat. Bridgeport, a little settlement in Big Meadows, where the footbridge crossed the East Walker River, won the honor over the lively mining camp of Monoville down by Mono Lake.

Inyo County did not come into being until 1866, after the creation of Coso County had failed by default. The new town of Independence and the Kearsarge mining camp west of it were main contenders for the county seat, Independence being selected as the better location. Two important boundary changes were made later. The first, in 1870, changed the northern boundary line from Big Pine Creek to the northern line of Township 6 South of the Mount Diablo Baseline, with the provision that Inyo County was to pay $12,000 to Mono for the land lost to that county. In 1872 a new southern boundary line was established, which added the southern portion of Panamint Valley and that portion of Death Valley which lies between Stove Pipe Wells and the present southern line of Inyo County, as well as the Tecopa-Shoshone region.

The establishment of Mono and Inyo counties gave eastern California an identity and the right to assert itself in state affairs. Civic pride demanded law and order -- communities began to mature -- but a mining community is not tamed overnight. After the turn of the century, mining documents were recorded in their respective counties and the districts ceased to exist, except as a means of describing the general location of a given claim. Little change has been made in the mining laws since the movement was legalized in 1872. If the laws are now obsolete as the burro prospector with his pick and shovel, perhaps it is because we are romanticists at heart and reluctant to change this tie with our colorful past.

As the influx of miners created an interest in the country east of the Sierra, the earliest settlers were finding favorable spots for farming and grazing in widely separated locations. Mushrooming mining camps created a ready market for grain, hay and beef. Supplies of any kind commanded inflated prices. Stockmen came, driving their beef cattle from the San Joaquin Valley over Walker Pass to the mining camp at Coso and northward as far as Bodie and Aurora. Many returned to take advantage of the good grazing lands they found in Owens River

Valley, and an increasing number of farmers were attracted to the new land.

It was inevitable that conflicts should develop between the native Indians and the newcomers who were taking possession of their lands, just as it was inevitable that the Indians would be subdued in the end by a force greater than their own. The natives, who occupied traditional hunting grounds and had a sparse supply of food at best, naturally were alarmed over the increasing number of settlers. An unusually severe winter in 1861-62 made the situation even more critical. Raids on herds of cattle and subsequent reprisals developed into a bloody war, marked more by shameful incidents than by righteous victories. Remote settlements were vulnerable to attack by desperate natives, and travel was hazardous. Many frightened newcomers left the region and activity slowed to a standstill. It was during this critical period that US soldiers were sent to Owens Valley to protect the whites. They founded Camp Independence on Oak Creek on July 4, 1862, at a site that is now a portion of an Indian reservation. Although the turbulence was to continue for another five years, the coming of the soldiers meant the establishment of white supremacy.

Miners, in general, had no quarrel with the Indians, but they, too, were subject to acts of reprisal. Prospecting diminished during that period of conflict, and some mines ceased operations until the Indian trouble should subside, but the mining movement was too great to stop. It had not yet reached its peak. During peaceful interludes, soldiers joined in the prospecting, especially in the Inyo Range east of Camp Independence.

Mining still holds an important place in the economy of the eastern Sierra, although the picture has changed. Now, more emphasis is placed on nonmetallic products, such as talc, dolomite and sulphur, and the salines of desert sinks. Modern prospectors dream of being skyrocketed to fame and fortune on a discovery of 'rare-earths', one of which is currently in great demand for color TV tubes. New claims are still being filed at the rate of 500 or so each year in Inyo and Mono counties. Mining today is big business, a powerful blend of the old and the new. Bulldozers have replaced the pick and the shovel for assessment work, and a good road is an essential for any operation -- but in many ways the old atmosphere resists the veneer of the times.

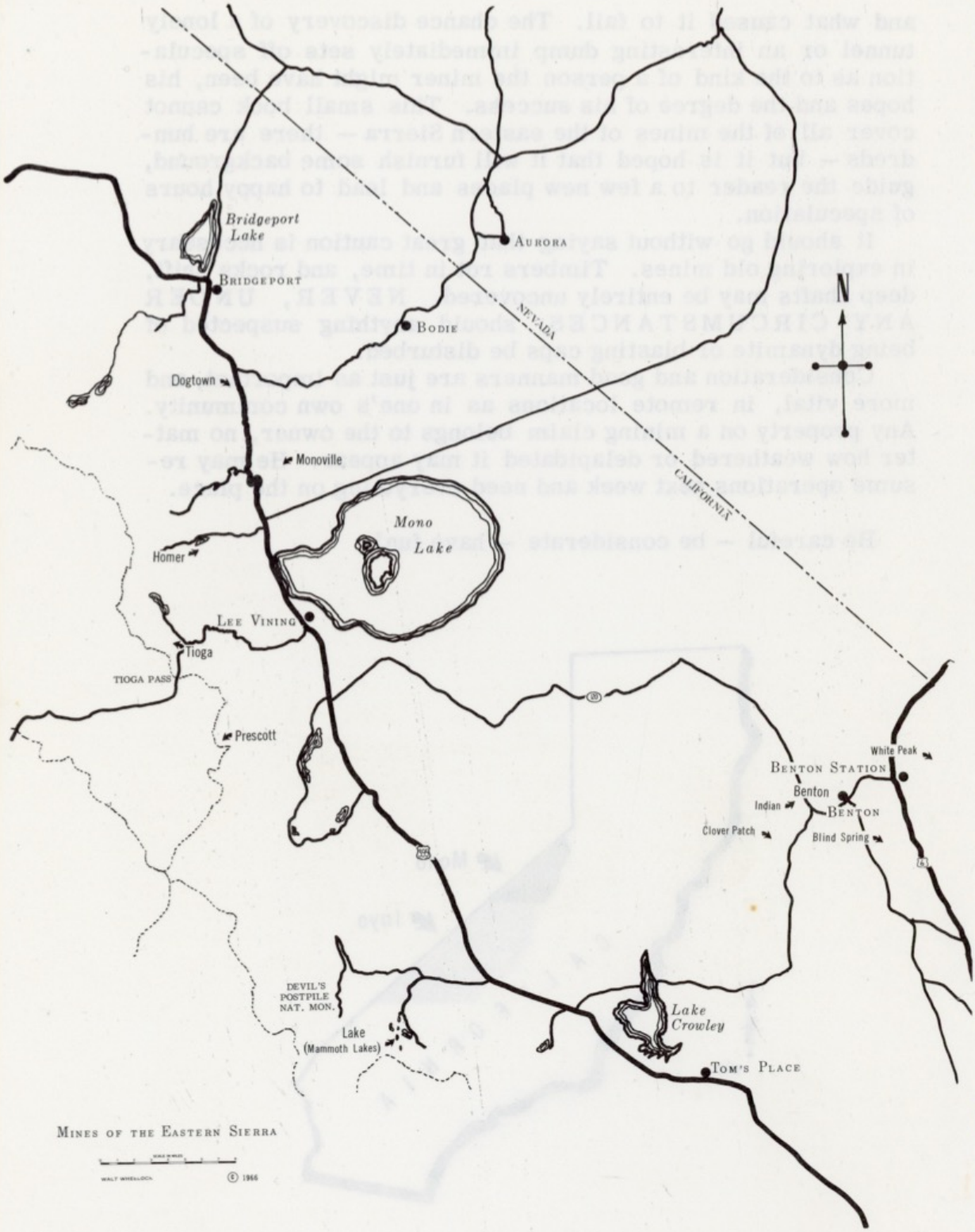
Much of the romance of the early mining era is in the eyes of the beholder. The sight of an abandoned mine development creates an intense desire to know all about its moment of glory

and what caused it to fail. The chance discovery of a lonely tunnel or an interesting dump immediately sets off speculation as to the kind of a person the miner might have been, his hopes and the degree of his success. This small book cannot cover all of the mines of the eastern Sierra – there are hundreds – but it is hoped that it will furnish some background, guide the reader to a few new places and lead to happy hours of speculation.

It should go without saying that great caution is necessary in exploring old mines. Timbers rot in time, and rocks shift, deep shafts may be entirely uncovered. NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, should anything suspected of being dynamite or blasting caps be disturbed.

Consideration and good manners are just as important, and more vital, in remote locations as in one's own community. Any property on a mining claim belongs to the owner, no matter how weathered or delapidated it may appear. He may resume operations next week and need everything on the place.

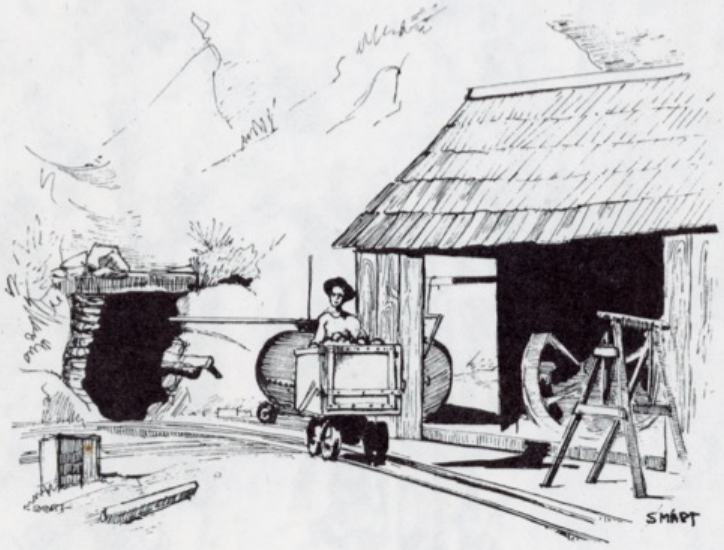
Be careful – be considerate – have fun!



Mines of the Eastern Sierra

Walt Wheelock © 1966

Northern Mines



Dogtown & Monoville

DOGTOWN was located just west of present Highway 395, six-tenths of a mile south of the northerly turn-off to Bodie. A California Historical Plaque marks the site. It all began when Cord Norst, a young German, and his Indian wife, Mary, set up housekeeping in a dugout on Dog Creek, where they panned gold for a living. Little could they have guessed the chain of events to follow. The year was 1857, the location, about half-way between Big Meadows (Bridgeport) and Mono Lake, was far removed from any settlement. It was hardly a place to turn the course of history, but their modest diggings were to lead to the first gold rush east of the Sierra. Mormons in Nevada heard of their activity and moved down to join in this placering. Two years later, Dogtown was a bustling little community.

On July 4, 1859, while festivities honored the date, a Dogtown resident named 'Chris' wandered over the hills which form the watershed between the Walker River and Mono Lake basin. As he stopped to rest, he idly picked up some of the dirt about him and was amazed to find it rich with gold. The news that gold could be picked up right off the ground spread as if by magic. Residents of Dogtown moved quickly to stake out claims ahead of outsiders, who poured in over Sonora and Mono passes, down from Carson Valley, and up through Owens Valley. Soon the ground was claimed for miles; the first gold rush east of the Sierra had occurred. Monoville had come into being. There was a frantic rush to fill all the needs of a booming mining camp. Lumber was whipsawed for use before any of the five sawmills could be brought into production. The first homes were dugouts or log cabins. Of the first thirty-one buildings erected, twenty-two were liquor shops. Important things first! In order to get into big production as rapidly as possible, resources were pooled to build an eleven-mile ditch to bring water from Virginia Creek for hydraulic operations. Enthusiasm waned, however, as winter approached. The placers soon would be frozen out of operation for several months,

DOGTOWN CABIN AND GRAVE
photo by Mary DeDecker

and the restless miners could find little comfort in the prospect of wasting that time in their crude shelters. The population diminished to a hardy 150 people, who managed to survive that first bitter winter. A welcome spring brought renewed activity and Monoville flourished briefly. It was the report of rich silver lodes in Aurora that finished Monoville as a mining town. Silver had become the magic word — each new find was to be hailed as another Comstock — and lode mining was the new way to wealth. Monoville lost not only its population to Aurora, but its buildings as well, when they were torn down and moved to the new excitement center. Sawed lumber was in demand, too valuable to be left behind.

The fact that Mono placers continued to be worked intermitterly was immaterial. They had fulfilled their role in our history by attracting the attention of the mining world and bringing a population over the Sierra. Trails and roads and improved communication with the rest of the state followed.

As for Cord Norst and his wife, they had chosen to remain at Dogtown during the rise and fall of Monoville. This was to be their home for many years, as they homesteaded land nearby and continued to find enough gold on Dog Creek to buy their supplies in the new county seat of Bridgeport.

There is no way of knowing how much was taken from the Dogtown and Mono diggings, but it is estimated to have been in the millions of dollars. Lesser placer deposits extended along the base of the Sierra, at varying elevations, all the way from Bridgeport to Owens River. For almost half a century, the sluice and the rocker were in common use along the entire 80 miles. Hydraulic operations were carried on at the largest deposits, as evidenced by unsightly mounds of gravel. Some work was done in fairly recent years. In the 1880's the Virginia Creek Hydraulic Mining Company operated very profitably on 3200 acres about the old Mono diggings.

One may still see remains of Dogtown's stone cabins and dugouts along the stream. Monoville was over the ridge southward, east of the present highway, on the north side of Conway Summit. The old water ditches from Virginia Creek may still be traced on the hillside. The 'Sinnamon Cut' said to have yielded $80,000 in gold, is a 1700 by 200 foot scar on the landscape.

Even though gravels of the old Mono diggings have been worked and reworked for over a hundred years, they still may show a flash of color in the pan, which is all that it takes to set your imagination soaring.

Homer District

LUNDY, a little town nestled in a glacial canyon at the head of a sparkling mountain lake, was supply center for both the Homer and the Tioga Mining districts in the early 1880's. The town and the lake, named for William O. Lundy, who was running a sawmill there in 1878, helped to meet the demand for lumber at Bodie, and the stream was, appropriately, called Mill Creek.

Promising gold outcroppings, discovered by prospectors Wasson, Nye and Horner, led to the organization of the Homer Mining District in 1879. Most activity centered in the upper, or westerly portion of Mill Canyon (also known as Lundy Canyon), and southward on Mt. Scowdan, overlooking Lake Canyon. The *May Lundy*, named for Lundy's daughter, high on the eastern face of Mt. Scowdan, became the most famous mine in the district, and was by far the best producer. It is said to have yielded $837,000 of the total bullion output of $1,022,000 of the entire district from the fall of 1880 through 1884. Later production was in somewhat the same ratio. Other mining claims filed included such colorful names as *Gorilla, Grand Prize, Wolverine, Gray Eagle, Lucky Mortan, Last Chance, Bay Queen* and, of course, *Bonanza.*

Lake Canyon, a beautiful glacial hanging valley, meets the south side of Mill Canyon almost at right angles, 1500 feet above and opposite the town of Lundy. Mt. Scowdan forms its towering west wall. Most of the above mentioned mines were on that mountain, well above timberline, and were worked from Lake Canyon. The lowest tunnel of the *May Lundy* was over 11,000 feet in elevation. The amazing developments on these extremely steep, barren slopes are evidence of the intrepid character of the early mining men. The mines were reached by trails and, in some cases, tramways were used to transport ore. All too often, these were swept away by snowslides.

Two of the lakes for which the canyon was named, Crystal

and Blue lakes, are but mountain tarns, but Oneida Lake is deep and of fair size. The fourth lake lies in the cirque at the head of the canyon. The little mining camp of Wasson, near Crystal Lake, served the mines during the boom days. It included a boarding house, which kept the boisterous miners out of Lundy most of the week, but when they did go down hill, they more than made up for it. Until recent years, the May Lundy Mill was an imposing structure by the outlet of Oneida Lake, and other buildings and equipment were located at the camp by Crystal Lake. Many of these were of the later developments.

A steep and difficult trail zigzagged up the cirque at the very head of Lake Canyon to Dore Pass, and on to the mining camp of Bennettville, a well-traveled thoroughfare during its short existence. Another, less precipitous trail crossed the divide farther east into the head of Warren Fork Canyon, providing access to the fine stand of timber there. A toll road, three miles long, connected Lake and Mill canyons, an essential link between these two centers of activity.

Although Lundy was never very large, it was a lively town in its day. There was the usual mining camp crowd, a Chinatown, the necessary business houses and hotels and more than enough saloons. The rival gangs, led by lawless characters, kept the populace uneasy until the leaders were eliminated. The *Homer Mining Index,* a weekly newspaper published by a humor-loving editor known as 'Lying Jim' Townsend, was extremely popular reading, both at home and abroad. Jim made the most of his available material, including his own shortcomings, and did not hesitate to manufacture good reading copy. In his words Lundy became a thriving city, to the delight of far away British investors in the Lundy mines. Railroad time tables, advertisements for two busy banks and large stores, and even elaborate and detailed accounts of the opening nights at the theatre were all published as part of the game.

Walled in by the steep mountains, Lundy was a natural for avalanches, and the people were well aware of this threat. The season of 1882 is known as the year of the bad slides. Six feet of snow fell that March, a dangerous load on the smooth crusted surface of the season. Six fearful avalanches, bringing tons of snow and debris down their pathways of destruction, resulted. Worried residents had taken the precaution of housing women and children in a building considered out of the path of slides, which proved to be a wise move. Four men were killed at the May Lundy tramway; others narrowly escaped death. The huge property damages were considered secondary at such a time.

As typical of the time, legal processes were slow to catch

up with rapidly changing conditions. A map of Lundy, showing blocks and lots, which was a portion of an ambitious town plan, was filed in 1888, after the town was on the decline. A patent to the land came through late in 1895, and deeds were issued to those persons who had purchased town lots, or at least to those who were still around to claim them.

The *May Lundy Mine* suspended operations in 1884 and, although there were numerous renewals during which additional ore, up to $2,000,000 was taken out, the high cost of operation eventually forced the final shutdown. For a period after the turn of the century, the *May Lundy* and other mines were operated as the *Crystal Lake Mine.* The most modern equipment was used, including a 20-stamp mill run by electrical power generated nearby. The final effort was made by R. T. Pierce and Tom Hanna, who purchased the properties of the Crystal Lake Gold Mining Co. for taxes in 1921, but they, too, were unable to make it pay. Wood and water were plentiful, and electrical power for the later developments, but the season was limited to about eight months at the best. The severe winters were costly, and the danger of avalanches was ever a fearful threat to life and property.

Other mines were worked intermittently through the years, mostly in a small way by owners, or under lease agreements. The *Parrett Mine,* discovered in 1877 about a mile west of Lundy, was worked for thirty years by the owner, apparently yielding enough for a satisfactory living. Eleven patented claims were worked, mainly by surface cuts. Ore was packed by burros to an arrastra in Mill Canyon, driven by an 18-foot overshot water wheel. Two other arrastras, operated by similar water wheels, were used to mill ore in Lake Canyon.

Much evidence of this mining activity still exists, and the scenic grandeur is still there. It takes but little imagination to transform the rugged canyons into the busy mining scene of the past. The lofty west wall of Lake Canyon is still marked with mine dumps and timbers; trails spared by avalanches can still be found; the old toll road grade down to Mill Canyon still would be a trial to creaking freight wagons; and the foundations of the town of Lundy are still visible at the west end of the lake. Perhaps remains of the old arrastras may yet be found, and even of the water wheels which drove them.

Lundy today is a quiet little resort on the lake. It is about six miles west of Highway 395, the turn-off being just north of Mill Creek, near the northern shore of Mono Lake.

Tioga

EMBRACING a choice portion of the very heart of the Sierra, the Tioga District stretches southward from Mt. Conness and the Lundy District. Although the 'Great Silver Belt' was first discovered in 1860, and seemed to be well known, it took a boy sheepherder to do something about it. He collected his first samples while herding a flock in the locality in 1874, but his father was not at all enthusiastic. The youth persisted, however, and in 1878 succeeded in filing the first claims along what he called the 'Sheepherder Lode'. It was through the efforts of a promoter from Bodie, that the mines were finally developed. He aroused the interest of eastern financiers, resulting in the organization of the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Co., backed by 800,000 shares of ten-dollar stock. Undaunted by the inaccessibility of the site, which was reached by trail up Bloody Canyon and over Mono Pass, the company moved quickly to establish a mine settlement up near Tioga Hill at an elevation of nearly 10,000 feet. It was to be named Bennettville, for Thomas Bennett, Jr., president of the company. Existing claims were purchased and new claims located, as work began on the *Great Sierra* and *Sheepherder* lodes. Six of the claims were soon patented.

That the company meant business was evidenced by two remarkable accomplishments, one necessitated by the other. Plans of operation called for the best in mining equipment. Delivery to the eastern foot of the Sierra was no small order. Then they were faced with the forbidding task of getting those heavy awkward pieces of machinery, 16,000 pounds in all, up the final four thousand feet of mountain wall. But mining men with capital behind them refuse to recognize the impossible exists. Deciding to make the haul over the snow, the most practical route would be by way of Lundy and Lake Canyon and so on up the cirque to the Tioga Crest. This feat, which took three months, was accomplished in the spring of 1882 by the use of six heavy hardwood sleds. As reported in the *Homer Mining Index*, it took 4500 feet of one-inch Manila rope, heavy

MAY LUNDY MINE
Photo by Mary DeDecker

double-blocks and tackle, and all the available trees along the route to boost the machinery up the mountain. No figures can measure what it took in human endurance and fortitude to exert such effort in snow conditions at elevations up to more than 11,000 feet. It is incredible.

That effort was to be enough to convince the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Co. that a road to the west, down the less precipitous side of the Sierra, was essential, resulting in the accomplishment that made the Tioga District famous. The Great Sierra Wagon Road, fifty-six miles long, was built in 1882-83 by way of the glacial dome-land and Yosemite Creek to Crocker's Station.

In the meantime, a tunnel was being driven into solid rock to intersect the *Sheepherder* and the *Great Sierra* lodes. It was to be 1784 feet long by July, 1884, when financial disaster forced suspension of operations. The camp closed apruptly. Reports showed that $300,000 had been expanded, $64,000 of it on the wagon road – with no returns!

In January, 1888, all property of the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Co., including the wagon road, was sold at sheriff's sale for $164,000 to a group of former shareholders in New England. Development was resumed. The tunnel, a double adit six feet wide and seven feet high, was driven to 2000 feet, when the whole thing was given up as a non-profitable venture. Tioga Hill has not yet yielded the fortune expected of it.

The Great Sierra Wagon Road deteriorated to little more than a trail, but it was to prove of greater value than the mines. Stephen Mather, who was soon to become Director of the National Park Service, with a few friends acquired the road in 1915 and presented it as a gift to Yosemite National Park. Some of the charm of the old road was lost in its realignment, but in general, west of Tioga Pass, it still follows the old route.

The area of the Tioga excitement was a little north of the present pass of the same name, on its eastern approach. The site of Bennettville was west of Tioga Lake (then known as Lake Jessie Montrose) near the entrance of the great tunnel. Tioga Hill, rising a thousand feet above it, is a portion of the main crest of the Sierra Nevada. An official map of an early survey of the 1880's shows a 'Bennettville and Lundy Telephone Line' running through the camp, and the same map shows the trail to Lundy as 'Tioga Road'. It is possible that these may have only originated in 'Lying Jim' Townsend's publication at Lundy. Two buildings of the mining era still stand, but vandalism has taken a sad toll. A brass plate countersunk in a rock at the top of Tioga Hill is the US survey point for early mining maps.

Prescott

PRESCOTT DISTRICT has joined others in obscurity, still the fact that Mono Pass is located on its westerly boundary gives it historical interest. In the early days, the Mono Trail was a main route across the Sierra, used first by Indians and later by the whites. It was on a trip over this trail, in pursuit of Yosemite Indians, that Lt. Tredwell Moore of the US Army found gold in the Bloody Canyon and Mono Lake areas in 1852.

The following year, Leroy Vining came over the same trail to follow up on the gold prospects. Perhaps he found that a beautiful meadow was a pleasanter place to settle than rugged Bloody Canyon or the barren shores of Mono Lake. At any rate, he stayed to prospect on the meadow floor on the prominent canyon that still bears his name, and which later was to become the route for the spectacular highway to Tioga Pass.

The Mono Trail still exists, a direct route from Mono basin up Bloody Canyon and over Mono Pass to Dana Meadows and Yosemite National Park, but only hardy hikers attempt it now.

At the very summit of Mono Pass, above timberline, are situated three mining claims, the *Ella Bloss*, *Ella Bloss No. 2*, and the Golden Queen. It is interesting to note that patents for the first two were granted to some of the principal stockholders of the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Company, including Thomas Bennett, Jr., at about the same time that operations were resumed at the Tioga Mines after the sheriff's sale. The *Ella Bloss*, with one corner in Tuolumne County, and in the Tioga District, is of particular interest because of the picturesque and well preserved old log mine buildings located upon it. Down the trail toward Dana Meadows, at the upper edge of the forest, the walls of a primitive log cabin still stand. One wonders if it might have served as the last outpost in the days when the Mono Trail was a well-traveled thoroughfare.

CALIFORNIA

Benton

(Blind Springs, White Peak, Indian & Clover Patch Districts)

TUCKED in its own little basin in the hills between the massive White Mountains on the east and the Sierra Navada in the westward distance, Benton today is but a charming ghost of the mining center that it was. In the beginning, it was a popular gathering place for those Indians who came to make use of the large hot springs located there. White pioneers were quick to appreciate the advantages of the place and began a settlement, then known as Hot Springs; later as Benton. The elevation, of 5600 feet, was low in comparison with settlements farther to the north, and the townsite was well removed from snowy peaks, so the climate was comparatively moderate. The snows that fell did not linger long. The spring, ten feet in diameter, was an outstanding asset as a hot water supply. Its temperature was 135° Fahrenheit and it flowed 400 gallons a minute, enough for the entire town, with a surplus for irrigation. After Bodie and Aurora boomed, Benton became an important way station on the route from the south.

It is not surprising that this focal point was the scene of a tragic incident during the period of Indian trouble. The well-known partner of William S. Bodey of Bodie fame, E.S. 'Black' Taylor, was destined to be the victim. After the loss of his friend in a snowstorm on the outskirts of Bodie, Taylor restlessly drifted on to other camps. Arriving at Hot Springs, he established himself at a little spring a short distance northeast of the settlement. Here he built a stone cabin with a thatched roof, stayed to prospect the area and found it good. Unfortunately, his lonely cabin was in the pathway of a band of marauding Indians, just at the time that feeling against the whites was building up to a high pitch. Here they had a chance to vent their feelings and to have a little excitement. They beseiged the place for two days, before they finally succeeded in setting fire to the roof. Upon being forced out of his flaming cabin, Taylor was finished by the howling savages, but not be-

FIRST TRAIN INTO CALIFORNIA ON C&C RR, 1883
from Hugh C. Tolford Collection

fore he had killed ten of them. The place is still known as Taylor Springs.

The *Cornucopia, Diana* and *Comanche* veins on Blind Springs Hill, east of Benton, were discovered in 1862. The hill, six miles long and rising 1200 feet above the town, was soon dotted with claims. As the work progressed, it was found to have a mineral-bearing zone for almost half of its length and about one and one-half miles wide. Enthusiasm soared. Claims were worked in feverish haste, with the help of Chinese laborers. The first discoveries continued to maintain their status among the best producers. The *Diana* was combined with the *Karrick* later, to become the *Wai Wera* mine, and the *Eureka* and *Laurel* claims, located in 1865, were combined to become the *Little Emily* mine. Both mines are well known in the history of Blind Spring Hill.

The White Peak District, seven miles east of Benton in Montgomery Canyon of the White Mountains, was well publicized at the time, but did not prove to be a great producer. Most of the development was on its *Phoenix* and *Mountain Queen (Creekside)*) claims. The camp of Montgomery never did acquire size or importance and its site is now inaccessible.

Indian District was about eight miles from Benton, westerly. The *Tower* mine proved to be the best producer. In the Clover Patch District, some twelve miles southwest of Benton, the *Wild Rose* and *Banner* mines did reasonably well. In 1885, the two districts merged, to form the Indian District.

Estimated production from the Benton area from 1862 to 1888 was $4,216,000. This was almost all silver. According to J. F. Millner, Wells, Fargo & Company's agent at Benton in the 1880's, estimates by district for the same period were: Blind Springs, $3,946,000; White Mountain, $60,000; Indian, $150,000; and Clover Patch, $60,000.

Ore reduction went through an interesting cycle. In the beginning, ore was shipped to Reno or San Francisco, but the shipping costs consumned much of the profit. There was a cry for local mills. So several small mills were built to serve the area. The Wai Wera Company built a five-stamp mill and processed some ore from other districts as well as the ore from its own mines. It burned in 1888 and was not rebuilt. A different outlook resulted from the appearance on the scene of the Carson and Colorado narrow gauge railroad. Then it became more profitable to sort the ore rather carefully and send it out by rail, most of it going to the Selby Smelting Works near San Francisco. Although they continued to process some

ore locally, mine operators along the route of the railroad became rather independent. Many of the mills that had been so eagerly sought were now forced to close.

Benton was the logical supply center for all of the nearby mining districts. Never becoming one of the larger boom towns; it endured longer than most of them. It was a busy and exciting place for many years. The mining atmosphere was there, a Chinatown flourished, and travelers stopping over added the cosmopolitan touch. There were lawless incidents, but, as a whole, Benton's reputation was relatively mild. Communication was surprisingly good for its time. A pony express carried mail between Benton and Aurora twice a week, and stages ran on regular schedule. A proposed Bodie and Benton railroad never reached Benton, however. The grading was completed to within fifteen miles of town in 1882, when work was halted abruptly. It was suspected that the Carson and Colorado had a part in discouraging the rival project. The settlement of Partzwick, almost a suburb of Benton on the north, offered some healthy competition to the local businesses, and assisted in the social life of the area.

The greatest activity occurred from 1862 to 1889, but the town lived on through lesser periods for many years. The hot springs are an enduring attraction -- and the mines renewed operation from time to time. In later years, Benton Station over the hill on the railroad became the center of business, such as it was. It also claimed the main highway to Nevada. Old Benton was left with little more than memories. Several of the early buildings, including the Wells Fargo office, still remain, as well as other buildings of a later period. One place of business sells gas and serves light meals in one of the old buildings. Visitors may enjoy browsing over relics of the early days displayed on the walls and in showcases that formerly held fast moving merchandise.

An enjoyable loop trip may be made from Bishop by way of Benton Station and Old Benton, westward via State 120 to Mono Craters and the south side of Mono Lake to Highway 395, and back on that highway to Bishop.

BENTON HOT SPRINGS
GENERAL STORE·POST OFFICE

Lake District

(Mammoth Lakes)

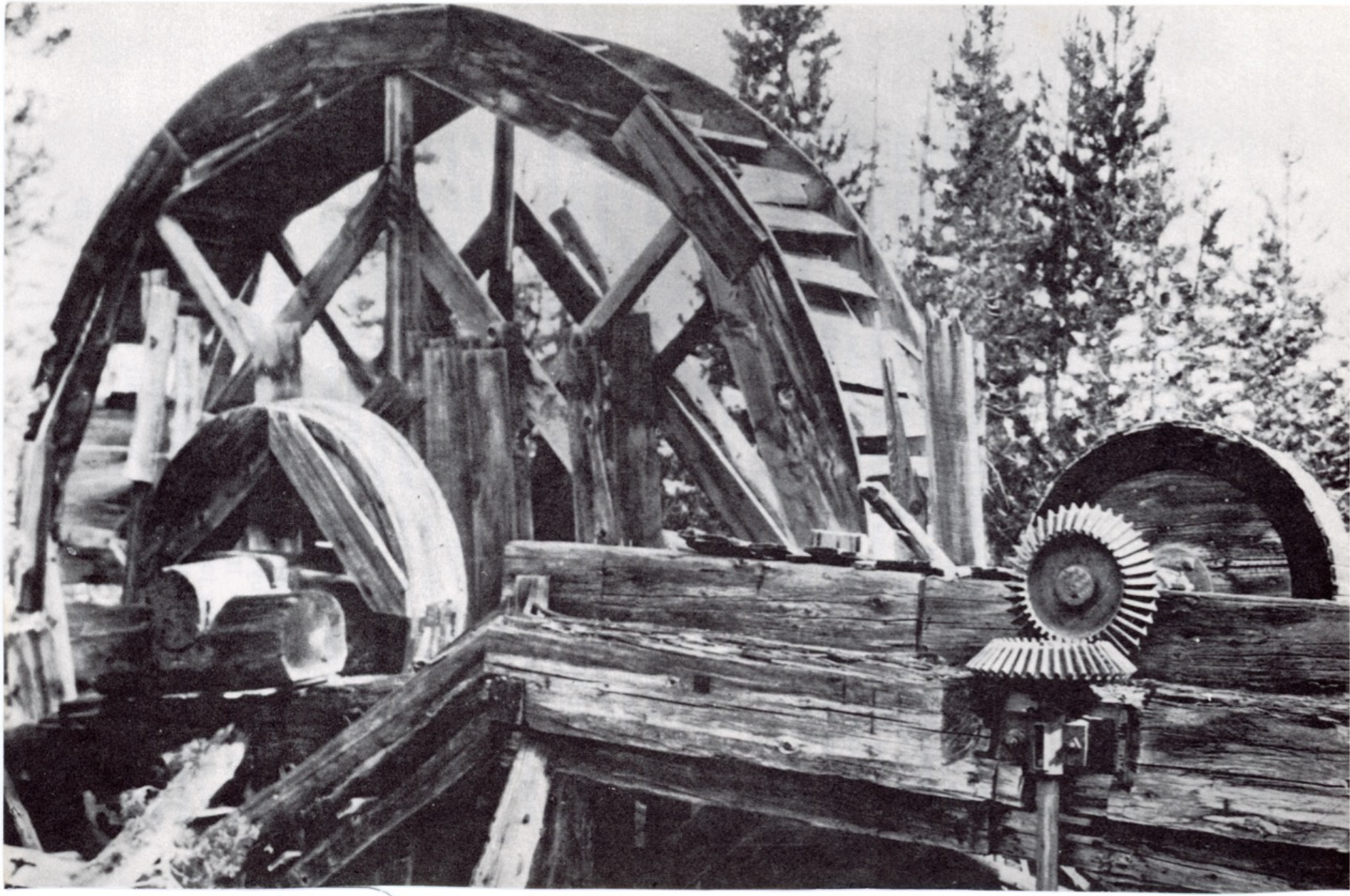
SCENIC Lake District derived its name from the fifteen mountain lakes lying within a ten mile radius of Pine City. The name 'Mammoth', which could hardly be used to describe any of the lakes, originated with the *Mammoth* vein on Mineral Hill east of Lake Mary. Soon it was applied to the entire region.

Attention had first been focused on the Pumice Mountain (Mammoth Mountain) area in connection with the *Lost Cement Mine*. The story has several versions but all center around samples of red cement-like ore in which grains of gold were set "like raisins in a pudding", supposedly picked up in the vicinity of Mammoth in 1857. The account usually heard was that a Dr. Randall of San Francisco came to Monoville in the spring of 1861 with samples of the red cement ore and a crude map showing Pumice Mountain as a landmark. They had been given to him by a grateful patient, a consumptive who was too sick to return to the scene himself. He and his brother had crossed the Sierra with some difficulty, coming over the crest at the head of the San Joaquin River. They found the red cement ledge on a pumice flat east of the crest.

Dr. Randall spent the summer of 1861 in the Mammoth area searching for the treasure. Returning the following year, he hired a crew of men, with Gid Whiteman as foreman, to continue the search. If the *Lost Cement Mine* was ever found, its location was never revealed. Whiteman devoted his life to the search, and hundreds of prospectors tried in vain to find the elusive treasure. There is still speculation as to whether it really existed and, if so, what vital clew was missing in the tale.

The silver-gold lode that made Mammoth famous was discovered in June 1877 by a group of miners who were searching for the *Lost Cement*. If it was not the mine they were looking for, it was something just as good. They gave it its impressive name and publicized it as the "largest Bonanza outside of Virginia City". Miners responded, true to form. The rush was on! Comstock investors, eager to profit from the new dis-

BENTON GENERAL STORE
photo by Walt Wheelock



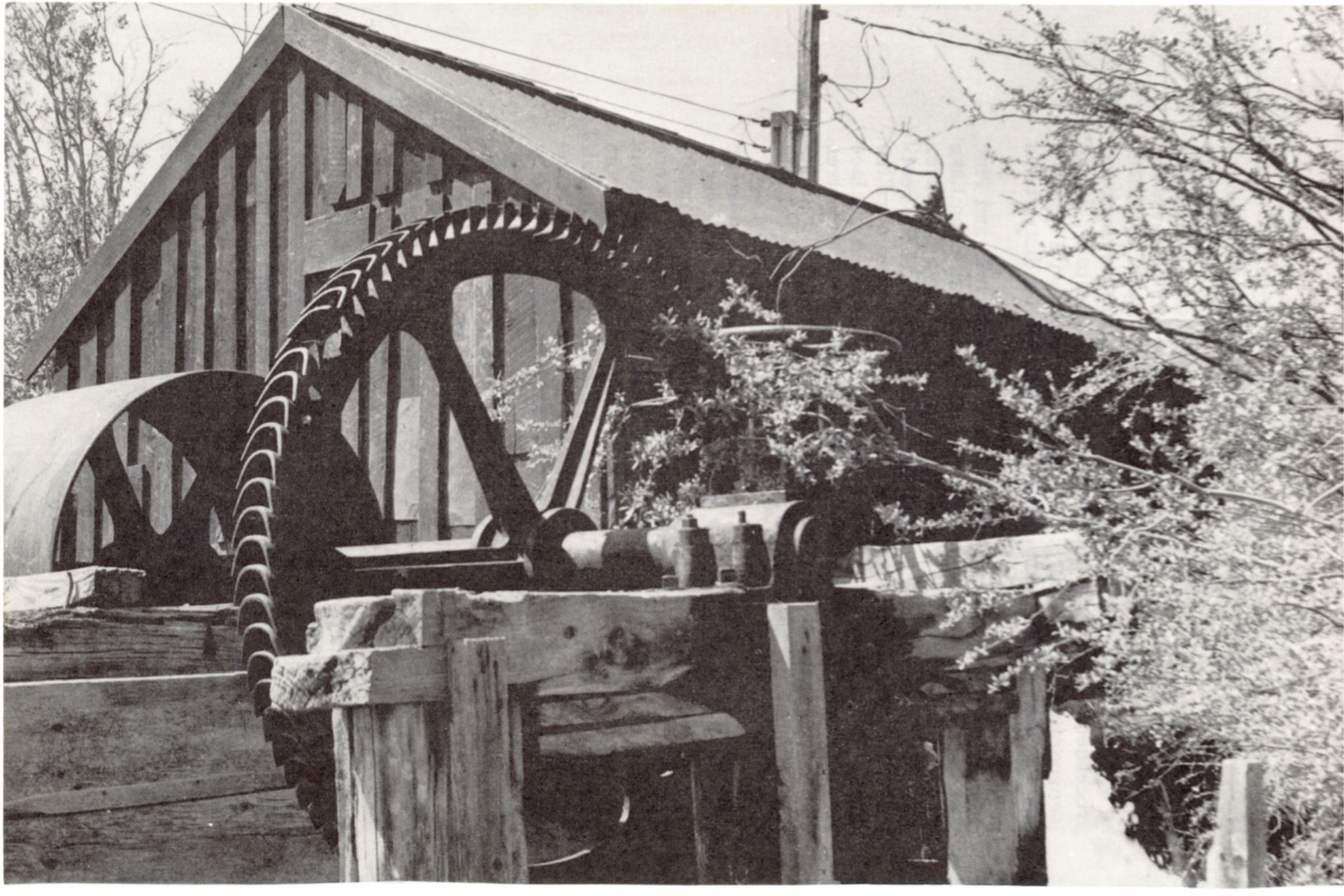
covery, secured the *Mammoth* mine by option before the summer was over, then waited impatiently to begin development in the spring. Activity had begun and the snows had hardly melted when General Dodge, a well known mining investor, arrived on the scene. Without bothering to inspect the mine, he bought it for $10,000 cash and $20,000 in company stock and proceeded to organize the Mammoth Mining Company, which incorporated in July 1878. The boom continued with renewed vigor -- new claims were located throughout the district and new companies were created to develop them.

Mammoth City sprang up in a gulch below the hill, and Pine City was a lively settlement 200 feet higher in elevation on Lake Mary. Their combined population was said to have been over 1500 people in 1879. Following the pattern typical of the restless influx to new bonanzas -- hopes were high and so were the prices of all it took to supply their needs. Women put lace curtains at the windows of their crude homes to give themselves courage to share their men's enthusiasm. Families who followed the mining game had long since learned to make the best of their enviroment.

Mammoth stimulated its share of the roads that were so vital to the development of the eastern Sierra. One was a wagon road from Benton, a well established mining town situated on the main thoroughfare to Bodie and Aurora. More important, however, was the construction of a toll road over the rugged 'Sherwin Grade', creating a more direct route from Bishop Creek to the Lake District. A fifty-four mile toll trail was built by J. S. French over the Sierra crest, from Fresno Flats (now Oakhurst) to Mammoth City, providing a route by which beef cattle were brought in from the San Joaquin Valley. A railroad route over Mammoth Pass was surveyed in 1881, but by then Mammoth's need for railroads was over.

The company forged ahead, driving tunnels and processing ore. A fine twenty-stamp mill was operating in 1878 and twenty more stamps were added the following year. Each stamp weighed 900 pounds. The mill was driven by a six-foot Knight water wheel. It was a type especially designed for use in the steep watersheds of California's mountainous country, to take advantage of pressure rather than volume of water. A flume brought the necessary water down from Twin Lakes. The mill was also equipped for steam power, which apparently was never applied. Nothing but the finest of equipment was brought in for the mill, regardless of cost. A twenty-foot flywheel was cast in Belgium of high grade 'gray iron' and transported by sea and rail and Nadeau's freight wagons to its destination on the

SHELTON MINE WATERWHEEL, 1879-
photo from Title Insurance and Trust Co.



mountain. The expense of shipping mining machinery was no small item in the cost of setting up a big operation.

By the end of 1879, the Mammoth Mining Company was said to have expended close to $400,000 in extracting bullion valued at $200,000. The unhappy stockholders had differences of opinion -- there were implications of mismanagement -- and no solution seemed apparent. Operations were suspended and in 1881 the property was sold at sheriff's sale. The towns were quickly abandoned. Severe weather conditions were considered the main factor in forcing the mine to close. Long winters cut down on production time, and strong winds were costly. Some experts, however, claimed that it could have been made to pay under proper management; that the mill never should have been shut down.

The Headlight and Monte Cristo companies also suspended operations after driving a joint tunnel 1500 feet without finding any ore of value. Other mines were developed, the *Lisbon*, three miles south of Pine City, being the most successful. It began producing in 1881 but its operation was intermittent until 1885 when the Lisbon Company put in a five-stamp mill driven by steam. Continuing in steady production for some years, the yield was reported to average $20 per ton of ore. Several arrastras also were operated in the district.

In the 1890's another effort was made to make the *Mammoth* mine pay but it, too, ended in failure. Only occasional work has been done on various mines in the district since that time. There are still those, however, who have faith in the Mammoth lode and the day may yet come when their dreams will be fulfilled.

Little is known of the pathos of mining camps, but a lonely grave below the town remains to tell of the tragic death of a pretty young bride of Pine City. Her husband and his mining partner had decided to stay for the winter, after the rest of the population had gone, hoping to complete a promising lead at their mine. She insisted on staying too. They were very much in love. In March, after the worst of the winter was over, a tragic accident caused her death. The distraught young husband was unable to make a proper burial because the ground was still frozen, so was forced to keep her body covered in the changing snow until the storms were over and the earth thawed. The ordeal was almost more than he could bear. When he and his partner were able to bury her down on the flat, they labored long with their few simple tools to make a picket fence for her grave. She had been an eastern girl and had longed for the day when she might have a lasting home with a picket fence around

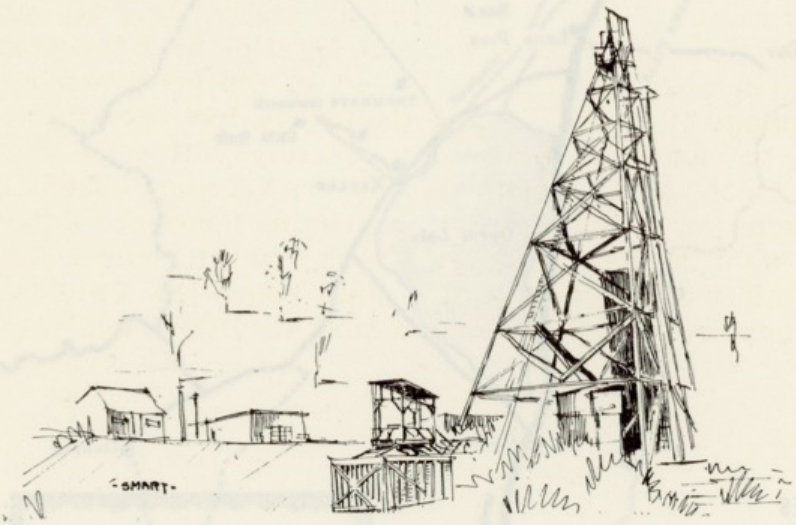
MAMMOTH MINE WATERWHEEL
photo by Mary DeDecker

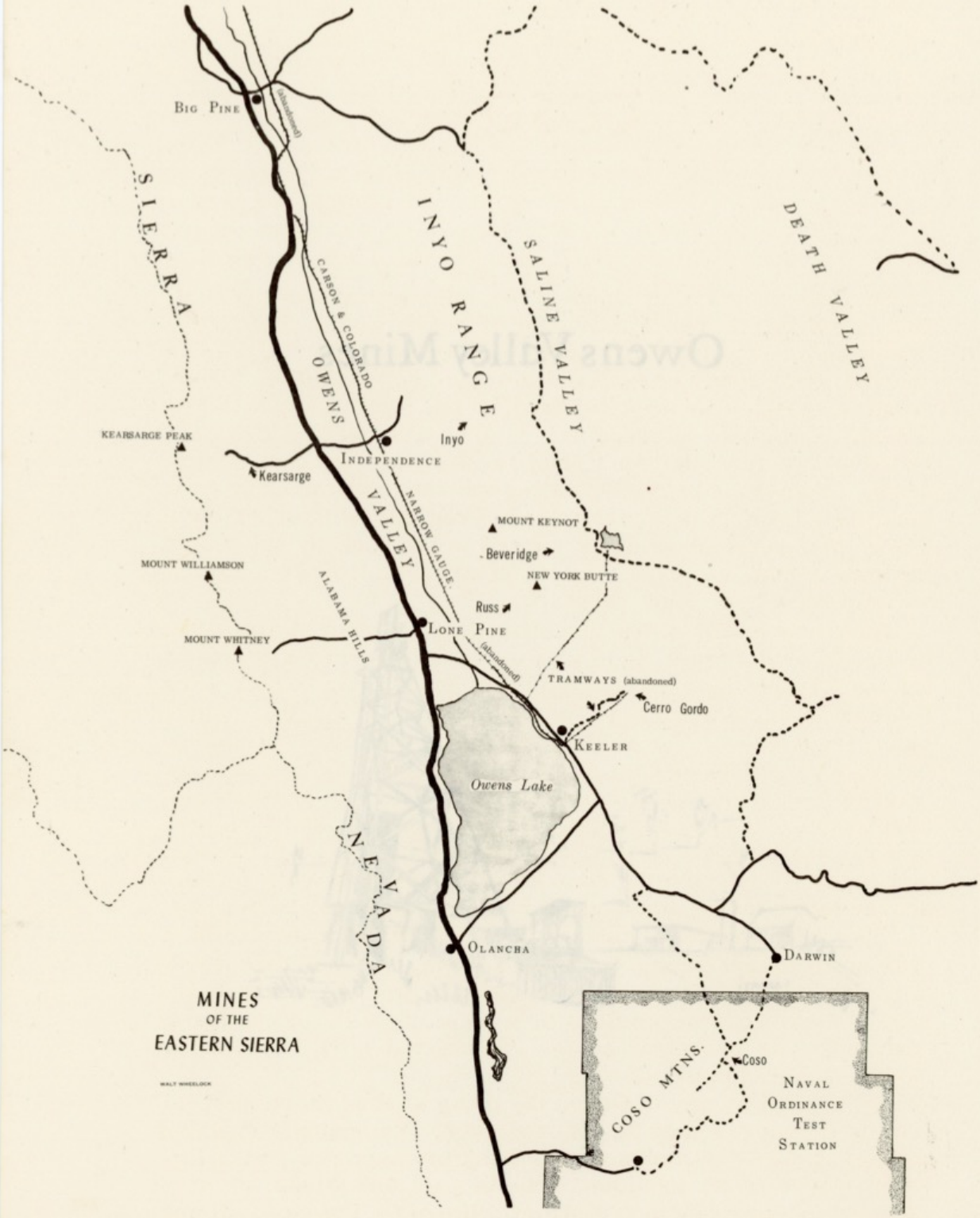
it. These original pickets have been replaced but the grave still may be seen on the south side of the road, well below the site of old Mammoth City.

After the mining towns were abandoned, Mammoth was to be enjoyed as a quiet summer retreat for three quarters of a century. It was a place of tall pines and clear mountain lakes, with space for solitude. But now it is the scene of a new rush, triggered by a most successful ski development on the slopes of Mammoth Mountain. A combination of natural factors make it one of the most ideal ski areas in the state – the winter snows bring in more gold than the mines ever produced. Year-around resorts cater to skiers in the winter and to other vacationists the remainder of the year. Real estate sells for fabulous prices. There is pressure for a trans-Sierra highway to come in over Mammoth Pass where the railroad was surveyed in 1881, but its feasibility is still in question.

The atmosphere of Mammoth is rapidly changing, but it still carries evidence of its mining days. Highly colored Mineral Hill, now known as Gold or Red Mountain, east of Lake Mary, was the center of most of the mining activity. Tunnel sites are marked by mine dumps, and parts of mining machinery and timbers are scattered about. The Mammoth Mining Company's mill, being considered a hazard, was burned in 1929, but stone foundations show the location near the present Mill City campground. Little is left of the great machinery which equipped the mill, except the twenty-foot iron flywheel. Pine City on Lake Mary has been completely obliterated. There are only traces of Mammoth City below, but stone foundations and remains of several log cabins may be found along the old road. A walk through the brush will reveal still more. A road turning left from about a half a mile above the Twin Lakes bridge runs down through old Mammoth City.

Owens Valley Mines




Big Pine
(abandoned)
SIERRA
INYO RANGE
SALINE VALLEY
DEATH VALLEY
CARSON & COLORADO
OWENS
KEARSARGE PEAK
Inyo
INDEPENDENCE
Kearsarge
VALLEY
NARROW GAUGE
MOUNT KEYNOT
Beveridge
NEW YORK BUTTE
MOUNT WILLIAMSON
ALABAMA HILLS
Russ
LONE PINE
(abandoned)
MOUNT WHITNEY
TRAMWAYS (abandoned)
Cerro Gordo
KEELER
Owens Lake
NEVADA
OLANCHA
DARWIN
MINES
OF THE
EASTERN SIERRA
WALT WHEELOCK
COSO MTNS.
Coso
NAVAL
ORDINANCE
TEST
STATION

COSO

Coso was an exciting word in the mining world of the early 1860's, where it meant a source of untold wealth. Actually, it was an Indian word which had reference to the thermal region nearby. The natives considered the place so valuable for medicinal purposes that it was shared by the Shoshone and Paiute tribes. Obsidian outcroppings in the area were extremely valuable too, furnishing material for arrow points and spearheads. Numerous petroglyph sites indicate that the Coso area must have been an important place, even in prehistoric times. These pictures and symbols carved in the rock by natives of the past could, no doubt, tell a fabulous tale of their day, if we only knew how to interpret them.

Rich ore ledges were discovered at Coso in March, 1860 by Dr. Darwin French and party on their expedition to search for the lost Gunsight mine. With this goal in mind, they were not unduly excited over a lesser find. The *'Gunsight'* story came from one of the Mississippians of the '49 Death Valley party, who had picked up a piece of silver float so pure that he used it to make a sight for his gun. This was presumed to have occurred in a mountain canyon west of Death Valley. Several well organized parties, such as that of Darwin French, and many a lone prospector, have searched in vain for the source of the silver gunsight. It has not been found to this day.

The party continued its search northward until the decision was made to turn back. In the meantime, they had discovered a rugged canyon containing a fine stream of water which flowed over a series of delightful falls, a pleasant oasis in the desert country. The party named the canyon and falls 'Darwin' in honor of their leader.

Returning by way of Coso, the party showed more interest now in the ledges they had passed over. Enthusiasm mounted as they gathered samples to take back to the coast. Assay figures proved to be fabulous, both in gold and silver. as proclaimed in San Francisco's *Alta California.* The Coso Mining

Company and the Coso Gold and Silver Mining Company were formed immediately and the Rough and Ready Mining Company the following year. Each claimed to be backed by an impressive amount of capital.

The Slate Range District, east of Coso, was organized in November, 1861. More fabulously rich ledges were reported there and new companies formed to furnish capital to work them. Promoters were exceedingly active. Prosperity fluctuated, affecting both districts alike. When enthusiasm rose, both districts benefited, and when it fell, both suffered.

Visalia was the source of supplies for the desert camps. The distance was long, mostly by trail. When the Indian, Captain George, established an express over the route, making it in four days by horseback, it was hailed as a great improvement. An ambitious plan for a wagon road over the Sierra, to come in between Owens Lake and Little Lake, was submitted to the legislature and chartered in 1862. It was said that there were twenty-eight applicants for the franchise, but nothing came of it. In the meantime, the Tulare supervisors granted authority to build a trans-Sierra trail with a thirty-three foot right of way, to be completed in two years. A condition calling for completion of a sixteen foot wagon road in five years was included in the grant. The trail was completed as reported to the supervisors to be completed, "to a point in the Owens River Valley at the foot of the Big Meadows and the Lone Pine Tree", at a cost of $1000. It became well known as the Hockett Trail.

Operators at the mines did not seem to do as well at producing as the promoters were doing at organizing mining companies. Some ore, however, was being taken from the *Josephine* mine and processed in arrastras. A steam mill was making a good recovery on ore from the *Winoshilk* mine. But stockholders were far from satisfied, and their restlessness eventually led to an investigation. This revealed that inferior equipment had been purchased, including the Josephine's mill. Wood in lieu of iron had been used for many of its parts. Certain procedures of management were questioned – the public had lost confidence in both the Coso and the Slate Range operations. Indian troubles had added to their problems. Mines had closed completely during periods of extreme danger, and the natives took advantage of such times to destroy or carry off as much as possible. They eventually burned the Searles mill in the Slate Range. The Josephine mill also was burned, and its owners made a claim against the government for $250,000, charging that the Indians were responsible. There was doubt that it had been done by Indians, and the amount was considered

excessive in any case. The owners failed to collect. The Josephine was finally sold at sheriff's sale for $30,667. The great Coso boom had ended.

As Americans moved out, Mexicans came in to work the abandoned mines. On March 23, 1868, when the district was reorganized, the minutes of the meeting were written entirely in Spanish. The place became known as the 'Spanish Mines'. Since the Mexicans were capable miners, content to operate on a small scale, they worked them profitably for some years.

There was a renewed interest in the mines again in the '90's, when the *Josephine* was relocated as the *San Jose*. Pat Reddy, famous as a criminal lawyer and always active in mining affairs, had an interest at Coso for a time. Flurries in more recent years brought other generations of miners to the scene but none of them operated on a large scale.

In later years the thermal area became better known than the mines. Health seekers came from far and near for mud baths and hot water therapy. A health resort located at the hot springs and put out ads with claims as extravagant as those of the miners before them. Water from the springs was sold for medicinal use.

An attempt to mine sulphur there during World War I was unsuccessful. Cinnebar deposits, discovered in 1929, did prove profitable. Processing was done in a small way until 1938 when a mill capable of handling 25 tons of ore per day was built. The deposit was exhausted the following year, after yielding nearly $17,000 worth of mercury.

Both the hot springs and the mines were withdrawn from public entry in 1945 when the entire area was set aside for the U S Naval Ordinance Test Station restricted area. The government made property settlements in favor of those who had legitimate claims, but many a miner felt that he had been deprived of a valuable strike. People who had enjoyed the hot springs were shocked at their withdrawal. Aged Indians were stunned to find that they were forbidden to enter the healing place that had eased their aching bodies.

Old Coso, at the time of withdrawal, was a picturesque little mining camp, almost a ghost town then. Some of its better rock cabins were still occupied, but the street was quiet -- its boom days long past.

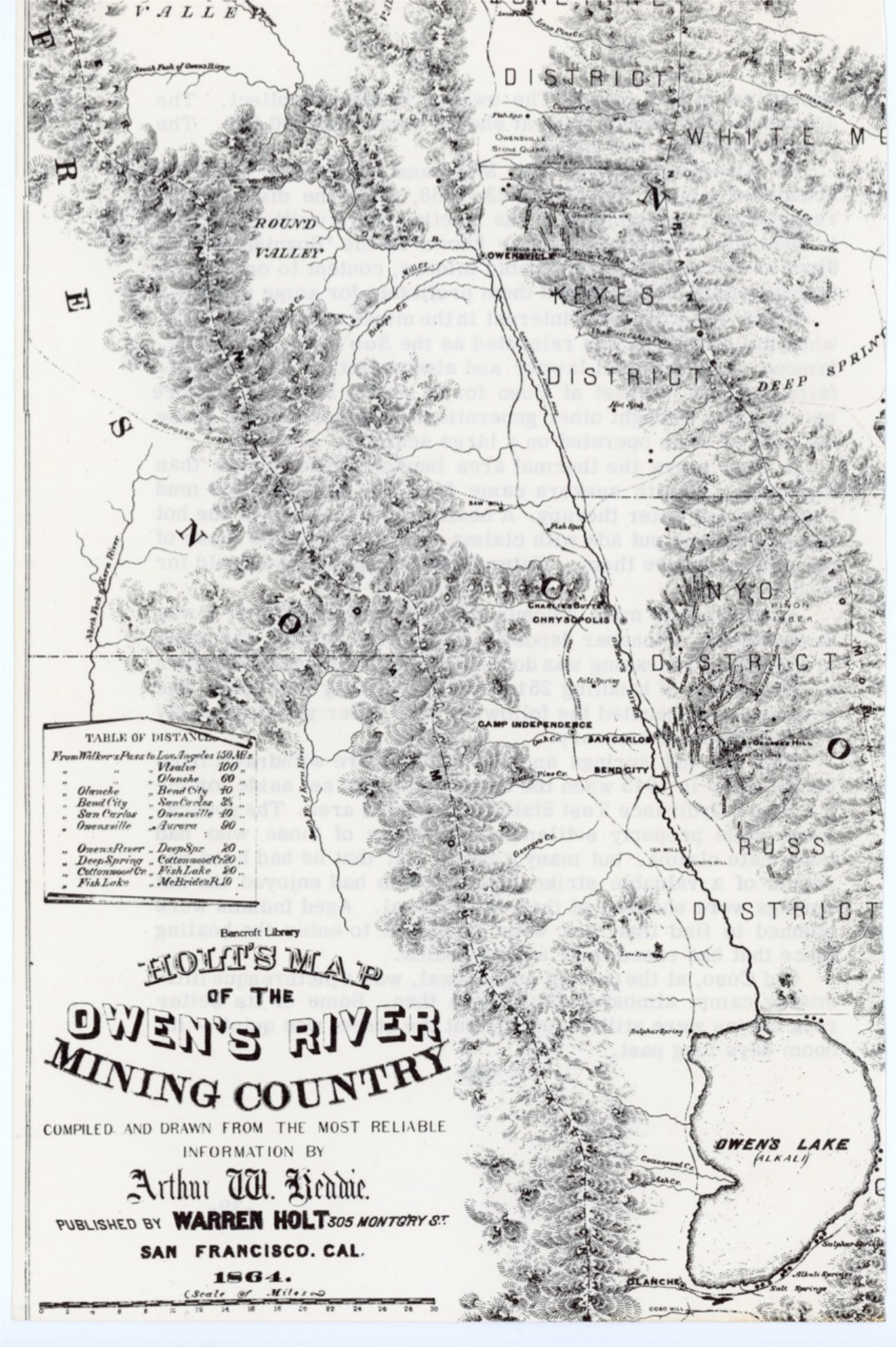


TABLE OF DISTANCES
From Walker's Pass to Los Angeles 150 Ms
" " " Visalia 100 "
" " " Olanche 60 "
" Olanche " Bend City 40 "
" Bend City " San Carlos 24 "
" San Carlos " Owensville 40 "
" Owensville " Aurora 90 "
" Owens River " Deep Spr 20 "
" Deep Spring " Cottonwood Cr 20 "
" Cottonwood Cr " Fish Lake 20 "
" Fish Lake " McBriden R 10 "
Bancroft Library
HOLT'S MAP
OF THE
OWEN'S RIVER
MINING COUNTRY
COMPILED AND DRAWN FROM THE MOST RELIABLE
INFORMATION BY
Arthur W. Keddie.
PUBLISHED BY WARREN HOLT 305 MONTGRY ST.
SAN FRANCISCO. CAL.
1864.
Scale of Miles
DISTRICT
OWENSVILLE
KEYES
DISTRICT
INYO
DISTRICT
RUSS
DISTRICT
ROUND VALLEY
CHARLES BUTTE
CHRYSOPOLIS
CAMP INDEPENDENCE
SAN CARLOS
BEND CITY
OWEN'S LAKE
(ALKALI)
OLANCHE
PROPOSED ROAD
Owens R.
Deep Spring
Fish Spr.
Saw Mills
Sulphur Spring
Alkali Springs
Salt Springs
Cottonwood Cr.
Georges Cr.
Coso Mill

Russ & Inyo Districts

THE OWENS RIVER VALLEY, a narrow 100-mile corridor between two great mountain ranges, was a little known land when it was first used as a thoroughfare north and south. The mighty Sierra Nevada on the west and the Inyo-Whites on the east were effective natural barriers to any cross travel. The valley was named in 1845 by John C. Fremont for his companion, Dick Owen, though neither ever saw the valley. Few actually entered it until the discovery of gold at Monoville attracted miners from all directions. All travel from the south came through this long, narrow valley, and soon it was to become the direct route between Aurora and the Coso bonanza.

Those first travelers came for business in the mining centers and took no time for unnecessary stops, though some note must have been taken of the country as they passed through. A 'Hill Party' did come into our valley purposely to prospect. From a base camp at the present site of Lone Pine, they prospected on both sides of the valley and located in Mazourka Canyon what were probably the first mining claims in this region. No development work followed these first prospects.

Early in 1860, the New World Mining and Exploration Co. arrived on the scene under the leadership of H. P. Russ. Financiers, ever alert for new opportunities, had organized the company in San Francisco and sent it over Walker Pass to investigate the potential of Owens Valley. Camping on the river south of Independence, the party surveyed the front of the Inyo Range with field glasses -- then went to inspect some prominent outcroppings southeast of their camp. They found a gold bearing ledge that looked so promising that they moved camp to a site nearby. A number of claims were located, including the *Union*, *Ida* and *Eclipse*, which were to become well known producers. The Russ District, taking in a long central section of the east wall of the valley, was organized April 20, 1860. But little development was accomplished, until two years later. The district was reorganized at that time and its laws revised.

It was here that the name, 'Inyo', first became known to white men. An Indian name for the mountain range in which the mines were located; Chief George explained its meaning as "the dwelling place of a great spirit." The fact that the range was a source of many of the natives' basic foods may have had some bearing on their high regard for it.

The establishment of Mono County in 1861 had its effect on the entire eastern Sierra. Pioneers settling in remote locations felt some security in the existence of a county government on their side of the Sierra Nevada, even though its practical value must have been doubtful. Prospectors scattered throughout the region, searching for new strikes. The white people had a definite foothold in the new land and, hardy souls that they were, were doing well. But fate was cruel in bringing in an unusually difficult winter in 1861-62. Severe winter snows were followed by a flooding rain in late January, resulting in melted snow to add to the disaster. The pioneers were to suffer losses and the plight of the natives was to be just as desperate. The critical situation precipitated incidents which were to lead to serious hostilities. It became so dangerous for the whites to venture out, unguarded, that even prospecting and mining slowed to a standstill. Many of these pioneers left the country.

The arrival of the Army at Camp Independence in 1862 was followed by a peaceful interval during which activity was resumed. The soldiers stationed at the camp soon became vulnerable to mining fever and it was a prospecting soldier who discovered gold to the east, where the Owens River curves against a spur of the Inyo Mountains. Samples were sent to San Francisco, with encouraging results. The San Carlos Mining and Exploration Co. was organized and a delegation of three men came to investigate the lode. It took them a month to make the trip, by way of Mono Pass and Bloody Canyon and the mining camps of Monoville, Aurora and Hot Springs. No doubt their enthusiasm was fired en route. Upon reaching the lode, they immediately found a vein of galena which increased their excitement. They frankly liked what they saw.

So the stage was set for another mining boom. But Indian trouble intervened and the people of San Carlos were occupied for same months preparing for a possible attack. It was not until the summer of 1863 that the real influx began. San Carlos and Bend City, three miles down the river, grew at a rapid pace. Chrysopolis, up river, was recognized as a promising camp. Claims were filed all along the front of the Inyos and up the gullies and canyons eastward. Mining companies were

organized in the coastal cities to reap the profits. Development proceeded at a frenetic pace. The San Carlos Company announced that its ditch, running southward from the curve of the river, was 2700 feet long, though the purpose of the ditch was not explained. Down river, the twelve-stamp Ida Mill was operating, the *Union* mine was turning out rich bullion from its eight-stamp mill, and the *Eclipse* was said to be the richest mine in all of California.

The year 1864 found the adobe villages prospering. Bend City and San Carlos, together, were predicted soon to have a population exceeding that of Visalia. Considerable rivalry was building up between these two towns. Free ferry service was furnished at San Carlos. Bend City was not proud of its own primitive toll ferry, so decided to build a bridge over the river. The question of its location became a lively one. Downtowners carried the vote to locate the bridge at the lower edge of town. Uptowners came up with the money and the imposing structure was built at the upper end. The village boasted sixty to seventy buildings, including two hotels. It appears that saloons did not rate the prominent billing given them in most mining camps. The first Union delegation from Owens Valley sent to the county convention at Visalia was instructed to vote for no man who drank whisky or played cards. Even the mining men took pride in giving names of refinement to their claims, such as *Silver Cloud, Olympic, Chrysopolis, Calliope, Romelia, Golden Era* and *Proserpine.* Culture was finding its way to Owens Valley. The first wedding, the marriage of a Mr. Woolsey to a Miss Warner, took place at San Carlos.

The great need of the district was for improved communication. Express routes to Aurora and to Visalia were life-lines to an outside world. A Visalia trip of only two days set a record, to the delight of the people of San Carlos. When San Francisco newspapers only four days old arrived by the same route, it was truly cause for rejoicing. California was coming closer!

The mining communities were well supplied by products of the farms along the river and westward. A sawmill at Big Pine was turning out good lumber, which had been a scarce item in the river towns. The San Carlos Mill, by the river at the corner of Romelia and Silver streets, was ready to go by the fourth of July. It was a fine five-stamp operation, with plans for enlargement. Life had not been easy, but comfort and prosperity were within reach at last.

It was during this year that the Inyo District was created from the original Russ District, being that portion lying north

of a line running west from Winnedumah. One of the laws of the new district provided that, in case of Indian trouble, the claims would be honored without assessment work until the danger was over. Provision was made for soldiers to file free of charge or labor until ninety days after terms of duty had ended.

Bend City was named provisional county seat of the new County of Coso, approved by the state legislature. Procedure was set up for electing county officials, and a Republican convention at San Carlos came up with a nomination for each office. June 6, 1864, was designated as election day but the election was never held due to failure to establish legal notice. Coso County failed by default.

Before the year was over, the Owens River settlements were suffering from hard times. Mines had not provided the wealth that had been anticipated. Perhaps the editor from Visalia correctly analyzed the difficulty after making a trip over. He reported that he saw only one mine operating on correct principles. Periodic Indian troubles, not yet over, added to the discouragement. The Union Mill down the river was burned by savages in June, 1865. When the town of Independence was founded across the valley on Little Pine Creek, the dwindling populations of San Carlos and Bend City moved to the new community, which was shortly to become the county seat.

W. A. Goodyear, in the Eighth Annual Report of the State Mineralogist, published in 1888, describes the mining towns as he found them then. By the bridge at Bend City he saw ruins of an attempt at reduction works, and a horizontal water wheel. Two large arrastras were noted, and parts of reducing equipment. Ruins of 33 houses, mostly adobe, were counted at Bend City and 26 at San Carlos. Both towns were found to be completely deserted. The large stone building housing the quartz mill at San Carlos was falling to ruin. Down river, the *Ida* and *Union* mines were both idle. The Union Mill had burned and the Ida Mill, about a mile north, was crumbling. Its owners were preparing to build a mill on the old Union Mill site. Modern machinery being shipped from England for the new plant was expected to crush fifty tons of ore per day.

A later report stated that the ore was transported from the mine to the river by tramway. The company's twenty-stamp mill operated for many years.

The *Eclipse* mining claim (later the *Reward*) was patented in time, as was the *Brown Monster* claim. The Reward Consolidated Mining Co. worked them both, along with six unpatented claims, from 1880 until 1914. In 1935 they went into

BURGESS MINE LOOKING ACROSS TO THE SIERRA NEVADA
photo by Mary DeDecker

production again for an extensive period. The *Eclipse* was one early discovery that proved its worth.

There is hardly a trace of the old towns left now. Bend City was located on the present road to Mazourka Canyon, where a tower of the transmission line stands near the bend of the old river bed, 4.3 miles from Independence. It was fortunate that the town was abandoned prior to the great earthquake of 1872. Had the adobe buildings been occupied, there would have been many more lives lost, without doubt. Besides, the town would have suffered the indignity of having the river abandon it for a new channel. The present traveler, en route to Bend City, may see convincing evidence of the shifting of the valley floor which took place during that quake. About three miles east of Independence, the road drops down over a 15-foot scarp, on an earthquake fault that runs north and south, between the present aqueduct and the old river bed.

The site of San Carlos may be reached by taking the first dirt road turning north from the Mazourka Canyon road after crossing the abandoned railroad right-of-way, and driving about three miles. The town was just west of the curve of the hill that crowds the road into an old canal bed. The abandoned railroad right-of-way runs close beside the canal at this point. The writer, in the late 1930's, found the building outlines still well defined by melted adobe walls, and the mill still recognizable as a stone structure. Since that time, weathering has taken its toll of the adobe, and the mill and any other rock foundations have been sadly dug apart. A well worn slate pencil was found inside the largest rectangular outline, which our children had already decided must have been the school. A few coins, dated in the '50's, were found in the sand toward the mill. The San Carlos ditch, smaller than the canal east of it, is still surprising well preserved. The narrow-gauge railroad has come and gone since San Carlos days, and the Owens River waters now flow down the Los Angeles aqueduct.

Mazourka Canyon and the area west to the foot of the range have been the scene of mining activities since the Hill party filed the first claims. Both lode and placer claims have been worked, intermittently, until the present time. Santa Rita Flat was named for an early mine -- Bonanza Gulch for its placer deposits. In July, 1894, a cloud-burst revealed coarse 'colors' on a road in the vicinity of Santa Rita Flat. The gold ranged in size from ten cents to $10 nuggets. Although water is not available for placering, many miners worked the gravel by a dry process during the next twelve years. In 1936, a placer mining company from Los Angeles leased claims on Pop's

Gulch, between Al Rose road and Santa Rita Flat. It was a big scale operation. Gravel was hauled by truck to a washing plant at Santa Rita Spring where a well furnished a good supply of water. Evidence of placer days, not too long ago, may be seen in diggings along Al Rose road and the passages 'gophered' under the gravels of Pop's Gulch. Farther down the canyon, water has been carried over the hill from Barrel Springs to Bonanza Gulch to placer the gravel deposits there. This location is still active.

Tunnels, shafts and diggings may be found throughout the Mazourka Canyon area. Some are dangerously unguarded. Others are still being worked and should not be disturbed. But there are still many interesting places where it is safe to explore. The *Whiteside* tunnel, near the mouth of Mazourka Canyon, 7.3 miles from Independence on the right side of the road, is so safe and spacious that it has been approved as an emergency shelter. As a mine it never did produce. Some say it was a promotional scheme – that there was nothing there when they began and nothing when they finished. A trail up the ridge south of the mine goes to Willow Springs, which was a millsite for the *Black Eagle* gold mine after the beginning of this century. The buildings at the springs have been burned -- even the old wooden water tank under the red willow tree has been destroyed -- but the site is still an interesting place to visit. A wagon road climbed the ridge north of the mine to reach the millsite by a slightly longer route. The grade proved to be too steep for general use. Lengths of cable secured to iron stakes are located above the steepest grades apparently to assist in hauling equipment and building materials up to the mine and mill. Another road, a little less precipitous, ran from the mill to the mine, high up on the mountainside. It took a cool head and considerable courage to drive a loaded ore wagon down that grade. The company lost one capable driver, a teen-age youth, when the young man's father visited this scene. One look at that mountain road convinced him that here was no place for his only son and heir.

Beveridge

BEVERIDGE, which was the most important gold producing district in Inyo County, has remained the most inaccessible. Its mines and mills tucked into a maze of canyons on the precipitous east face of the Inyo Mountains were reached only by trails. Although these were well built to carry the traffic of heavily loaded pack trains, many portions of these old trails have since been washed out by cloudbursts. Occasional springs were the only sources of water, and they were few and far apart. In some instances the flow was enough to create running streams in the canyons before being lost to the thirsty gravel. Such places were blessed with streamside trees — willow, cottonwood, or even oak. As a whole, however, wood was extremely scarce, except for a fair amount of pinyon at higher elevations and a fringe of bristlecone and limber pine on the peaks. Most of the important requirements for mine production were scarce or missing, but the gold was there, so hardy miners appeared on the scene and proceeded to overcome the obstacles.

The organization meeting was held December 7, 1877, at Big Horn Spring in Hunter Canyon, about midway between the summit of New York Butte and the lake in Saline Valley. This spot was about as remote as could be found, even in those days, but it was typical of the district. The occasion was important and the miner members were present. W. L. Hunter, discoveror of the first claim, was elected chairman of the new district. He proposed that it be called 'Beveridge' in honor of John Beveridge, a worthy citizen of the time and one who had been active in discoveries east of Cerro Gordo. This same Beveridge had been named justice of peace at Bend City by the Tulare County Board of Supervisors in 1865 and had continued in that capacity after moving to Independence. He was elected first district attorney for Inyo County, but failed to qualify. W.L.Hunter served as Inyo County clerk, auditor and recorder in 1885 and 1886.

WOODCUTTER'S PACKTRAIN
photo from Huntington Library

According to the record of that meeting at Big Horn Spring, boundaries of the Beveridge District were described as:

> "Commencing at a point in Saline Valley, at the North-East corner of Cerro Gordo Mining District, thence North fifteen miles, thence West to the summit of the Inyo Range of mountains, thence Southerly along the summit of said Inyo Range to a point where the Northern boundary line of Cerro Gordo Mining District crosses said summit, thence East along the Northern boundary of Cerro Gordo Mining District to the North-East corner of the same and place of beginning."

Among the laws adopted to govern the district, No. XV affords an interesting comment on local conditions:

> "That in consequence of the scarcity of timber, the miners of this District claim all the timber of Hunter's and Robles' Canyons for mining, building and fuel for the District and any wanton destruction or location of the same for private use will not be tolerated."

The *Big Horn* mine, discovered by W. L. Hunter in 1877, became an active group of eight claims and a millsite located between Hunter and Beveridge Canyons. Hunter built three arrastras in the canyon named for him. These he operated until 1893, claiming to have recovered up to $10,000. This property has been worked from time to time until recent years, although transportation of ore has always been an expensive item. Selected ore was transported by pack mules over the Inyo crest to the roadhead in Long John Canyon, then by truck to Owenyo. Here it was transferred to the railroad for shipment to smelters at Salt Lake City. Reports show a total production figure of $40,000.

The Keynot group, of seven claims on the ridge north of Keynot Canyon, made the record for the greatest production in the district. It also had the most extensive development, including seven tunnels from 150 to 750 feet long. Its deepest mine went down 1800 feet. Ore was carried three miles by pack mules to a five-stamp mill in Beveridge Canyon, formerly Hahn's Canyon. This amazing accomplishment of transporting heavy mill machinery so far by trail paid off in savings of costs for carrying ore. Beveridge camp, below the junction of Cave and Beveridge canyons, was, and still is, by far the most inaccessible of the mining camps of the Inyos. Hence, it has had few visitors since it was abandoned and shortage of water along the route makes the trail a difficult one. The mine was

operated continuously from 1878 to 1886, and then intermittently until 1907. The total production figure is $500,000.

The *Burgess* mine *(Iron Sides)*, which included nineteen claims, was a later gold producer. It too had impressive development figures, a shaft 156 feet deep, a tunnel 700 feet long, and 2000 feet of drifts. A gasoline hoist and compressor were used in this operation. Located on the Inyo crest, one and a half miles southerly from the summit of New York Butte, it provides a dramatic view of the snowy High Sierra to the west, as well as a glimpse of the salt flat of Saline Valley down Craig Canyon. This mine may be reached from the west side by trail from Long John Canyon or by jeep trail up from Swansea. A cabin and outbuildings provide shelter in case it is needed at this exposed location.

Other mines in the district include the *Chilula, Gavilon, Montano* and *San Antonio* mines near the head of Robles Canyon [Robles Canyon, a small canyon not named on modern maps, runs northerly from Hunter's Canyon near the Big Horn Mine], the *Laura* and *McAvoy* mines north of Keynot Peak and the *Cinnamon* mine which had its own two-stamp mill near the *Big Horn* mine. The *Gold Standard (Vega)* mine of a later date was in the vicinity of Craig and Little Hunter canyons. The camp for the Vega operation is located just south of the mouth of Hunter Canyon, overlooking the salt lake of Saline Valley. A good dirt road branches from the main Saline Valley road and climbs the alluvial fan to the camp, where a caretaker greets visitors and offers a pleasant spot of shade. Springs in the green canyon above furnish a good supply of water which flows through a small pool and is channeled about the place. It is worthwhile to take a short walk into Hunter Canyon. A small stream confined between its rugged rock walls falls into refreshing pools bordered by maidenhair fern and columbine, a surprising oasis in this desert land.

Kearsarge

HIGH in the canyon of Little Pine Creek (now Independence Creek), a mile downstream from Onion Valley, one may find stone rubble and remnants of the cabins of Kearsarge, although the site is almost covered by fill for the road. Lower in the canyon, overlooking the switchback approaching the 'county cabin', is the rock foundation of Kearsarge Mill. At intervals up the slope, northward, are rockwork footings for the pipeline that carried water to the mill from a spring up in the cliffs. Still lower on the stream, half a mile above Seven Pines, was the five-stamp Rex Montis Mill. Its foundations are plainly visible from the old Onion Valley road.

Kearsarge Peak, the beautifully triangular mountain west of Independence, was the scene of great activity as the Coso mines declined. It was said to have supported 3000 men but that, no doubt, was an exaggeration typical of the times.

The original discovery was made in 1864 by woodcutters who were doing a little prospecting on the side. They were camped at Todd's (later Hill's, for one of the woodcutters, and now Gray's Meadows) to whipsaw lumber for the nearby settlements. Searching for a worthy name for their mine, they decided to call it *Kearsarge* in honor of the Union battleship that had so recently sunk the Confederate raider, *Alabama*. That would show those Confederate sympathizers down in the Lone Pine Hills what was thought of their *Alabama* mines. Kearsarge Peak was named for this first mining claim.

Prospectors arrived on the scene as if by magic, and soon there were claims filed on every likely ledge. The Kearsarge Mining District, taking in an extensive segment of the eastern Sierra, from Big Pine Creek to the Alabama Hills, was organized in September of that year. It was then in the county of Tulare. Rich ore attracted the attention of prominent mining men – the Little Pine silver ledges were said to be the richest ever discovered on the Pacific coast -- and so financing was forthcoming. A shipment of ore, to a mill in Nevada, netted $900 a ton. Wealth was here for the taking.

KEARSARGE PASS AND PEAK FROM INDEPENDENCE
photo by Walt Wheelock

Development of various claims progressed through 1865. Dreams of rich prospects carried enthusiasm through the long months of winter, even though it was necessary to suspend activities on the mountain. The year 1866 was one of achievement. Machinery for the ten-stamp Kearsarge mill was hauled up the canyon of Little Pine Creek and set up on the Sister Mill site north of the creek. By July, the $40,000 installation was ready to operate. Up canyon, along the stream, the busy mining camp of Kearsarge was flourishing, claiming a population of 1500 people. In the meantime, the town of Independence had been established down in the valley on the same creek. Kearsarge, being the largest town in the newly created county of Inyo, tried for the county seat, but lost out to Independence which was more centrally located. Nevertheless, the future looked bright. As a part of a new county, with Indian troubles behind them, and the wealth of their mines within their grasp, the people of Kearsarge had every reason to feel secure.

As claims on the mountain were developed, three main groups in widely separated locations became the best producing mines. Their ores were rich in both gold and silver. The Silver Spout was just below the summit of the peak on the south side, at an elevation of 11,500 feet. The *Rex Montis*, highest of all at 12,000 feet, was on the north side of the peak's eastern shoulder. Both were considered high grade but there were many difficulties in working mines at such extreme elevations. The *Kearsarge*, at approximately 9000 feet on the southeast slope, became the best known mine in the district.

The winter of 1866-67 forced another long delay in production up on the peak. Most of the miners and their families left camp for the winter but some remained in their lofty homes, well stocked with supplies. All went well until the end of February when a deep snow fell on the crusted surface of the already white slopes, a condition which should have been warning enough. On the afternoon of March first the gleaming canyon wall yielded its weight of new snow with deadly swiftness. The avalanche thundered down on the lonely settlement and, for all practical purposes, finished the town of Kearsarge. Rescuers from Bend City and Independence, as well as the woodcutters down the hill, rushed to the scene. Mrs. C. W, Mills, wife of the mine foreman was among the victims of the slide. Mills, himself, was dug out of the snow with no worse than a broken leg. When all were accounted for, the shaken residents of Kearsarge went down the canyon to Hill's, with plans to finish the winter elsewhere.

Half a century later, one who escaped the avalanche as a young man returned to the site of the old camp to make a memorial to those who were not so fortunate. Selecting a large granite boulder, he cut a monument about four by six feet, with a depth of a foot, then proceeded to smooth the surface in preparation for inscribing the names of the victims. For three summers the kindly old man returned to his task. Then came a summer when he did not come back, so the project was never completed.

Work continued at the mines, under a series of different managements, until the problems of operation proved to be too great to overcome. Repeated attempts have been made, through the years, to make the old mines pay but the mountain, serene as it appears, has succeeded thus far in resisting them.

One brief period of later development on the Silver Spout was based at a little flat above the falls of the north fork of Independence Creek. The mine is situated precariously at the head of a steep chute that descends to Onion Valley just east of the falls. A trail to Golden Trout Lakes climbs the cliff between the chute and the falls. Evidence of an attempt to build a tramway down from the mine is seen in a rusting cable curled uselessly on the talus below the chute. A more recent attempt was made to work the mine by using water stored from melting snow, but the water came in the form of a cloudburst, wiping out the whole operation. A cable in use at that time still remains in place on the south side of the mountain. Its lower terminal may be reached by going up a short, steep trail from the upper switchback of the road to Onion Valley. The trail to the mine starts at this point.

The *Rex Montis,* sometimes called the 'Ice Mine', last worked from 1875 to 1883, has been under refrigeration since then. It includes four patented claims, the *Rex Montis, Arctic, Boomerang,* and *Mountain View.* Other claims in the group, including the Rex Montis mill site, were never patented. Three ore veins were being developed by three tunnels when production ceased. An attempt was made in 1935 to remove the ice which had accumulated in the tunnels. The middle one was cleared for a distance of 260 feet, revealing developments long forgotten, but winter weather ended the project. A new approach for working the mine is now underway, the plan being to tunnel through at a lower elevation to intercept the Rex Montis vein. If this is successful, it would avoid the snow problem and allow a reasonably long period of operation each year. A new road is being built, following somewhat the same route as the old trail to the mine by way of Sardine Canyon on the

north. It leaves the Onion Valley road at its most northerly switchback on the east face of the mountain. The mine may also be reached by trails which branch from the Silver Sprout trail up the south side. Predictions are that the *Rex Montis* will yet bring wealth from Kearsarge Peak. Who can say when a mine's day has ended?

The *Kearsarge*, known as the *Cliff* mine, includes the *Virginia, Golden State, Sister, West Virginia* and *Keystone* patented claims, and the Sister mill site, also patented. Up the canyonside north of the old mill site, a mine dump reveals the location of the mine. It had advantages over the other groups in that it was several thousand feet lower, resulting in a longer working season, and was situated near a road, as well as having a water supply for its mill site. The original wagon road, little more than ruts through the boulders, may still be traced from the little Jewish cemetery on the highway north of Independence, up the alluvial slope toward the north side of the mountain to Tub Springs. Turning southward here, it climbs over the saddle to the canyon of Independence Creek, which it follows upward to the Kearsarge Mill. The fine rockwork retaining walls used in the building of that portion of the road between the saddle and the mill have yielded to later road work. The entire canyon is now so cut and scarred by various road construction projects that its seems nothing short of a miracle that any of the old sites have escaped. A fine paved road now runs all the way to Onion Valley.

The *Kearsarge* mine operated again in the 1920's. Four houses to accomodate employees were built just upstream from the mill site. Lumber for their construction was transported by George Parker, by way of Parker Ranch and Tub Springs. When operations were suspended, the houses were sold and moved to Independence. The machinery used in both the Kearsarge and the Rex Montis mills was sold for scrap long ago, most of it during World War I. That of the Kearsarge mill was hauled out by way of Tub Springs, for the road up the canyon from Gray's Meadows and Seven Pines had not yet been built. Scrap from the Rex Montis mill was snaked down along the creek to the roadhead at Gray's Meadows. Such was the fate of much of the wonderful machinery of the early mining days.

Cerro Gordo

CERRO GORDO, the Mexicans' 'Fat Hill' was the Comstock of California's eastern Sierra. Its great silver, lead and zinc deposits were found on the west slope of Beuna Vista Peak, at the south end of the Inyo Mountains. The story of its productive years, when silver-lead ingots were stacked around camp like cordwood and present day cities were then vying for the lucrative business of supplying the mines on the hill, is a fantastic chapter in mining history.

Palbo Flores is credited with the original discovery in 1865. Mexicans were on the ground floor and had first choice in filing claims. They worked the mines on a small scale for some time, without interference from the impatient Americans who failed to realize the store of wealth east of Owen's Big Lake. Most of their ores were smelted in vasos, their own type of crude ovens. But the richness of their find was too good to keep. A Mexican prospector, on a visit to Virginia City, could not contain his excitement and proudly displayed ore samples to support his claims. His specimens were promptly tested and the results convinced even the sceptics that this was a place worth investigating. The word flashed across the state.

Among the Americans who rushed to the scene was Mortimer W. Belshaw of San Francisco, who was to become the mining baron of Cerro Gordo. He looked it over and immediately went to work to acquire claims. Abner B. Elder became his junior partner. Both men had gained valuable experience in working silver ores in the mines of Sinaloa, Mexico, so were well qualified to take on Fat Hill. Arriving back in San Francisco with a shipment of ore, they had no difficulty in securing financial support. Their new corporation was named the Union Mining Company, for the *Union Mine*, which they intended to acquire. Belshaw had already obtained a third interest in the mine in exchange for a fifth interest in the smelter he expected to build. His particular interest on the *Union* was typical of his foresight. It contained the best galena orebody on the hill, and he well knew that lead was an essential item for process-

ing the rich silver-quartz ores. With his power of persuasion, he anticipated no problem in acquiring control of that mine.

The Lone Pine Mining District, taking in an entire cross section of the Inyo Range, including Cerro Gordo, was organized April 5, 1866. A thousand locations were filed by 1870. The original claims were long and narrow, allowing the miner to follow his ore vein as far as 3000 feet in some cases. When federal mining laws were established in 1872, the district was reorganized and named Cerro Gordo for its center of activity. Its local laws were altered to conform with the new United States regulations, including maximum dimensions of 600 by 1500 feet for lode claims.

Back on the scene at Cerro Gordo, Belshaw, now financially secure, proceeded to establish his kingdom on the hill. Three basic needs must be met, a wagon road, a smelter, and a water supply. The road came first, a narrow, winding eight mile ascent, but, nevertheless, a way for four-wheeled vehicles to reach the mines. It was hardly completed when Belshaw and Elder set up their toll station at the narrows. Here was the first example of Belshaw's ruthless business procedures. Other miners who had helped in building the road were given no consideration at the toll gate. In the years to follow, control of the road provided an effective means of penalizing competition which could not be squeezed out.

No time was lost in hauling the heavy machinery for their smelter up the new road. Belshaw's remarkable energy had the furnace in production by the fall of 1868. He was not satisfied with normal production. His plans called for an output of four tons of bullion per day, which would require greater ore loads than that type of furnace could treat. Driven by his own demands, he found it necessary to invent a new appliance to equalize the heat. The Belshaw water jacket so increased the efficiency of his smelter that it yielded five tons per day, an unheard of achievement. The daily monetary yield was approximately $3500. The shining bars of silver-lead bullion were shipped by way of Los Angeles for further refining at the Selby Smelting Works in San Francisco.

By 1871, Cerro Gordo was well established as a mining town; Buena Vista Peak looked down on a scene of bustling activity. The canyon walls were well scarred with mine diggings. Two blast furnaces and numerous *vasos* were treating ores as fast as they could be dug from the earth. The town's main street was lined with good frame buildings which housed all the stores and offices essential to a thriving community. More were being built as fast as lumber could be obtained from

sawmills in the valley. Simple shelters of all kinds -- dugouts, rock and canvas cabins -- extended the residential area far beyond the main streets and, of course, there was a Chinatown. Daily stagecoaches carried passengers up and down the winding road. The new two-story American House welcomed visitors who preferred the best. Proper social functions were held here. Most of the important business in town was carried out at the Cosmopolitan, although two other saloons also enjoyed good patronage. Night life centered about Lola Travis and Maggie Moore and their painted girls, whose houses were conveniently located at either end of the town. Their centers of dancing and revelry were disturbing elements to some of the town's leading citizens, but they were obviously a minority group. Gunplay was frequent, fatal shootings all too common. Cerro Gordo was considered a lawless place, even in those days of turbulent mining camps. It attracted more than its share of tough characters, in additon to a normal quota of quick-draw local residents.

Victor Beaudry, who built the town's second fine new blast furnace in 1870, came to Cerro Gordo, as a merchant in 1866. Being a good businessman, he gradually acquired valuable mining property by attachments on unpaid bills. Among these acquistions was half interest in the *Union Mine*, the portion which Belshaw had never obtained. Actually, Beaudry was smelting ore before the Belshaw furnace was completed, but was hardly a competitor until he built the efficient new model. Production of the hill leaped again! This called for a steady flow of freight wagons down the Yellow Grade. Belshaw, in meantime, had bought out the interest of A. B. Elder in their smelter, and also the one-fifth interest of the Mexican who had traded in his share in the *Union Mine*. It seemed wiser then to join forces with Beaudry than to fight him. So it was Belshaw and Beaudry henceforth who ruled the hill, and reaped its profits together.

Transportation of bullion was an everlasting problem. The freighting contractors were hardly able to keep up before the new smelter was fired up. After that it was impossible. If they made it down the Yellow Grade without losing control of the heavily loaded wagons, they faced the long haul through sandy wastes and rocky washes to a shipping point. The trip took about three weeks. On their return they were laden with supplies for the booming town, machinery for the mines, and hay for the ever essential strings of pack animals. The best they could do was not enough to keep the output moving. Backlogs of ingots collected at the smelters. The situation became

VIEW OF CERRO GORDO FROM MINE-STOCK PROSPECTUS
from Bancroft Library

desperate. What good was their fantastic rate of production if the bullion was not delivered to the refineries!

The roles played by ambitious young cities in their attempts to furnish adequate transportation, and so capture the Cerro Gordo trade, makes a fascinating story. Visalia and Santa Barbara had already tried to claim the Owens Valley trade, but it was during Cerro Gordo days that an intense competition developed between Ventura, Bakersfield and Los Angeles. That the latter city was the ultimate winner was a great factor in its early growth and prosperity.

James Brady of the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company was responsible for one interesting phase of the transportation story. His company had established a camp at Swansea, on Owens Lake, and had built a smelter there. The cost of hauling ore down the grade from Cerro Gordo had to be met by savings elsewhere, so Brady conceived the idea of freighting across the lake. This would save three days of hauling through the sand around the shore. A little steamer was built on the Owens River, just above the lake and a wharf was constructed at Swansea, but the great earthquake of March 26, 1872 delayed both projects. The upheaval caused the lake to recede in the area of Swansea, so the wharf had to be built 150 feet longer than planned. The ship, 85 feet long and 16 feet wide, was finally launched June 27, 1872. She made her maiden voyage across to Daneri's Landing, later named Cartago, loaded with thirty tons of bullion. A week later, as part of a Fourth of July celebration at Ferguson's Landing, south of Lone Pine, she was christened the *Bessie Brady* by Brady's little daughter. The steamer performed so well that the backlog of ingots was soon transferred to Cartago, but Belshaw was more desperate than ever. The bullion still was not reaching the refinery. In January, there were 18,000 bars awaiting shipment, mostly at Cartago, where they were being put to use for building temporary huts roofed with canvas. Thirty thousand of these bars had collected by the middle of May. They averaged 87 pounds in weight and were each valued at $335.

At this point, Remi Nadeau, who had previously freighted for the mines, returned through Owens Valley from a contract in Nevada. Belshaw and Beaudry intercepted him near Owens Lake and made a deal then and there. Together they formed the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company, which set up a chain of stations a day's haul apart all the way to Los Angeles. They bought out former freighting contractors and acquired little *Bessie Brady*, putting every possible effort into a plan for a maximum performance. Once more the bullion was moving!

By 1874 the now enlarged smelters were putting out eighteen tons per day -- and the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company had the situation well in hand.

The time came when the greedy furnaces were running out of fuel. For miles, the Inyo Mountains had been stripped of pinyon and juniper. Even any of the accessible limberpine and bristlecone were sacrificed for fuel or mining timbers. Recognizing the need for a new source of timber, a Colonel Sherman Stevens built a sawmill high in Cottonwood Canyon west of Owens Lake. A flume was constructed down the canyon to deliver logs and lumber to the wagon road. The Stevens mill went into operation in 1873 and by 1876 it was doing so well that its business was incorperated as the Inyo Lumber and Coal Company, and the flume extended to the lake shore. Besides mine timbers, lumber and wood for fuel, the company sold charcoal, making it in two large kilns beside the lake. Since most of its products were shipped on the *Bessie Brady*, the company decided to build its own ship. The keel was laid at Cottonwood in the spring of 1877 and this little steamer made her maiden voyage in June. She was named the *Mollie Stevens* for the daughter of Colonel Stevens. One of its first assignments was to carry 30,000 feet of mining timber ordered by the Union Consolidated Company, probably one of the last orders from that company.

Cerro Gordo had no natural springs, so it was necessary to import all the water used in the smelters as well as for domestic purposes in the town, except where it might be collected from occasional snowfalls in the winter. In 1870 Belshaw ran a pipeline to capture a supply of 1300 gallons per day, but the system was not protected adequately against freezing weather and was out of order much of the time. The usual supply came in by pack animals and was sold to small consumers at ten cents a gallon, while the wholesale rate was five cents and up. One can well imagine how conservative the townspeople must have been in using the costly item. The normal water bill for the American Hotel was $300 per month. There were times when the furnaces were forced to shut down for lack of water and this was indeed serious. After enduring some years of this unsatisfactory situation, Stephen Boushey, a mine owner, secured financial backing to organize the Cerro Gordo Water and Mining Company. This was based on a bold plan for tapping the bountiful waters of Miller Springs, ten miles north of Cerro Gordo and 1800 feet down from the Inyo crest toward Saline Valley. This meant pumping up to the crest and then conveying the water to town through ten miles of pipe buried

deeply enough to prevent freezing. It took weeks to haul the necessary pipe and equipment up from Los Angeles. Winter weather interrupted the project but, finally, in May 1874, the town was deluged with 90,000 gallons a day of the precious fluid. There followed such an era of luxurious cleanliness as had never been known on the hill.

Belshaw's aggressive moves had made him and Beaudry the undisputed masters of Cerro Gordo, but by the early '70's the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company was becoming a threat to their domain. This was the company that had its smelter at Swansea on the northeast shore of Owens Lake. Their managers were strong, shrewd men who were not inclined to yield to Belshaw's high-handed ways. It was this company which had the vision to build the *Bessie Brady* and, later, to finance Colonel Stevens in building his sawmill, both of which benefited Belshaw. But the very existence of its operation was a great irritation to the baron on the hill. When it began acquiring valuable mines at Cerro Gordo, it was not to be tolerated. His toll road was the Swansea company's ore line, so Belshaw deliberately let it deteriorate until the ore wagons were forced down to hauling at only half capacity. John Simpson, who owned an interest in the company's tunnel, forced the issue into court when he refused to pay at the toll gate. A judgment was issued in his favor, and the aroused citizens of Owens Valley joined in protest of Belshaw's stranglehold on transportation to Cerro Gordo. Petitions were presented to the County Supervisors, who reduced the toll rates by one-half.

The Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company had won a moral victory but it never recovered financially. Foreclosure of a $98,000 mortgage caused it to suspend operations in the spring of 1874. That summer a cloudburst swept a layer of debris over the camp and smelter at Swansea, a sad burial for a courageous enterprise.

Belshaw, in the meantime, was occupied with subduing another rival. He had never succeeded in acquiring the *San Felipe* silver-quartz claim which crossed the side line of the Union Mine. When the owners of the *San Felipe* extended a tunnel, which they had acquired from John Simpson, to meet their silver vein, they came upon galena, the lead ore so important for smelting silver. Noting galena on the *San Felipe* dump, Belshaw was beside himself. Claiming that they were working his *Union* lode, he boldly took possession of the disputed portion. Thus began a long, bitter struggle.

When the matter was taken to court, judgment was given in favor of the owners of the *San Felipe*, in spite of the fact that

Belshaw and Beaudry were represented by the wily Pat Reddy. But Reddy proved a master at delaying tactics, which tied up the *San Felipe* so the owners could not operate. Finally, in May 1875 he obtained a new trail before the State Supreme Court. The suit dragged on for another year. Then the Union Consolidated Company was formed to include representives of both factions. The costly litigation, in addition to increasing costs of operation, ended the lusty days of Cerro Gordo. The furnaces shut down early in 1878.

When the Carson and Colorado narrow-gauge railroad came to Keeler in the early 1880's there was a revival in activity on the hill. With cheaper transportation assured, the mines were worked periodically, but without any great success until Louis D. Gordon discovered that the dumps were rich with zinc ores. His perserverance led to a new era, from 1911 to 1915, when Cerro Gordo again took its place at the top of the silver-lead, and now zinc, production in the state.

Mineral surveys of the mines showed a criss-cross pattern concentrated below Buena Vista Peak. Fifty of the claims were patented, including the *San Felipe, Santa Maria, San Benito, La Despreciada* and *Ygnacio* which were among the early Mexican locations.

The next productive period was brought about by a raise in the price of metals in 1915. A picturesque feature of mining days entered the picture then, a Leschen aerial tramway running from Cerro Gordo to Keeler. Its cables spanned the canyons from tower to tower for 29,560 feet, its buckets silhouetted against the sky. The system, powered by electricity, had a capacity of 16 tons per hour. It was used again in the 1920's to transport limestone, mined through the Union tunnel, to Keeler for use in the Natural Soda Products Plant and for the Clark Chemical Company's plant at Bartlett.

Considerable exploration work was done again in the 1940's and some ore shipped. Wally Willson, who acted as caretaker following that period, eventually sued the company he was serving for back wages and came out as possessor of its mines. Inadvertently, he failed to list the tramway among the assests, so had no hold on it. The company promptly sold the tram system to a Nevada concern which removed it from its lofty towers, only to let it rust away, unused, at its new location.

Cerro Gordo is credited with producing $15,000,000 worth of ore. No other group in California has matched its record for silver, lead and zinc.

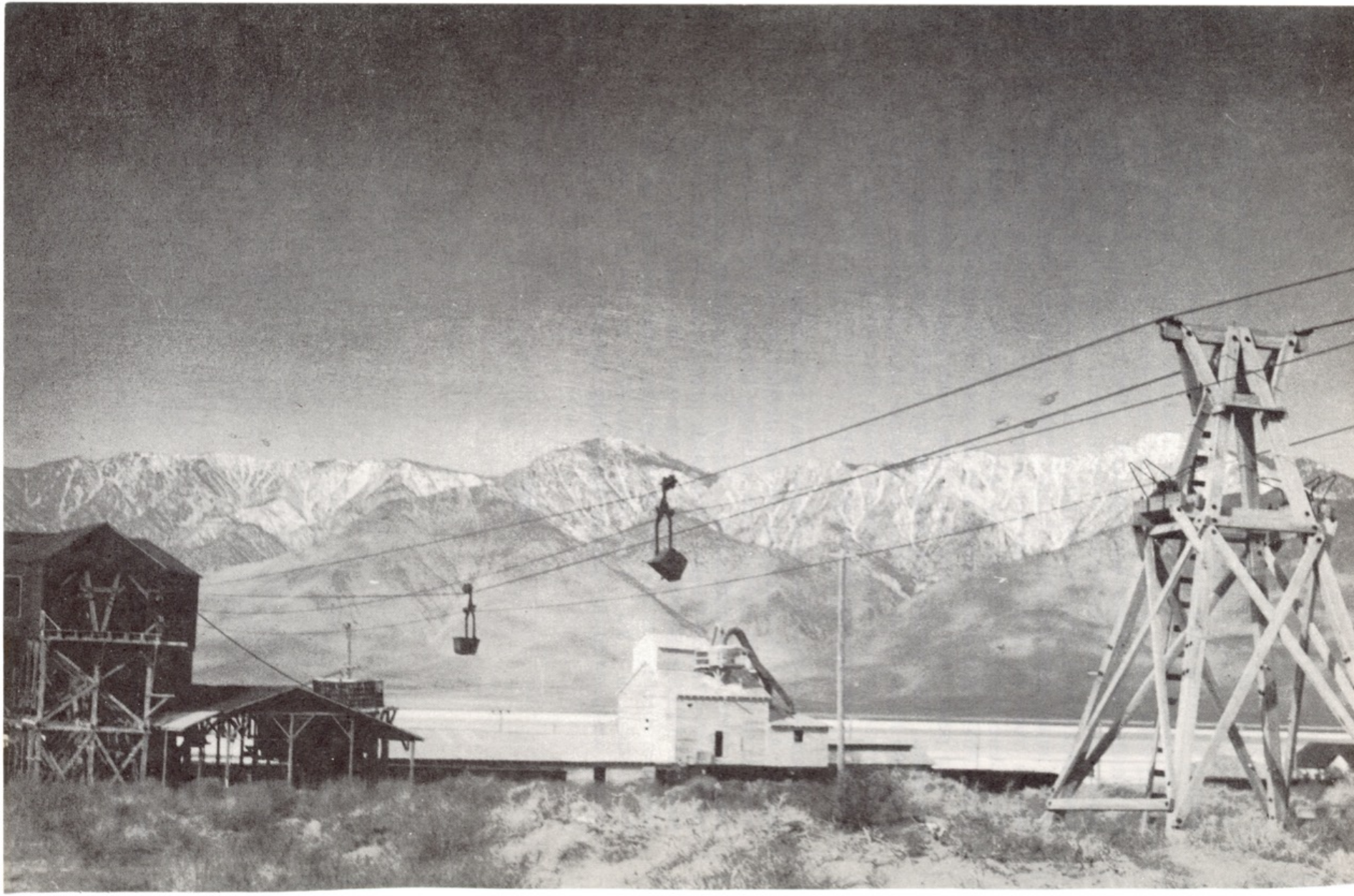
CERRO GORDO AND SMELTER FLUE - 1963
photo by Mary DeDecker

The site of the old town is dominated by Buena Vista Peak (now known as Cerro Gordo Peak), its white marble face capped with a slanting dark band. The *Union* mine dump spills from the mountainside above the town, and the canyon slopes are dotted with lesser dumps. One can only guess as to the miles of tunnels and stopes underground. The two-story American Hotel stands on Main Street, a little uphill and across the road from Beaudry's Smelter. Buildings of later years are grouped at the main intersection. A sad little cemetery with a marvelous view is situated on the slope of the hill north of town. Just over the Inyo crest, by way of a saddle north of Buena Vista Peak, are more mines and the site of Belmont Camp.

The peak may be seen for miles from Highway 395 across the lake. The mines are reached by a dirt road turning east from the highway at Keeler, a distance of eight miles. There are several rather steep grades which discourage making the trip in a conventional passenger car.

It appears that Cerro Gordo may be coming to life once again. A buyer is acquiring mining properties on the hill, and notices of a quiet title action naming familiar Cerro Gordo claims have been published. Heavy earthmoving equipment rolls up the Yellow Grade. Roadside properties are festooned with NO TRESPASSING signs, but not even the interested residents of Keeler, at the foot of the grade, have any idea as to the meaning of it all. This latest operation seems to be completely wrapped in the best of Space-Age secrecy.

CERRO GORDO FURNACE - 1958
photo by Mary DeDecker



References

Austin, Carl F., *Coso Hot Springs.* Maturango Museum Publication No. 1. Maturango Press, 1963.

Cain, Ella M., *The Story of Early Mono County.* Fearon Publishers, 1961.

California, State of, *Annual Reports of the State Mineralogist.* (title varies)

Chalfant, W.A., *The Story of Inyo.* Pinyon Book Store, 1965.

Doyle, Helen MacKnight, *A Child Went Forth.* Gotham House and The Literary Guild, 1935.

Farqunar, Francis P., *History of the Sierra Nevada.* University of California Press, 1965.

Hobbs, William Herbert, "The Earthquake of 1872 in the Owens Valley, California", (Read before the Association of American Geographers at Chicago, December 1907.) Wilhelm Engelmann (Leipzig), 1910.

Hubbard, Douglass, *Ghost Mines of Yosemite.* Awani Press, 1958.

Lingenfelter, Richard E., *The Cement Hunters.* Glen Dawson, 1960.

——, "Desert Steamers" *Journal of the West,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1962). Books, 1962-63.

Myrick, David F., *Railroads of Nevada,* 2 volumes. Howell-North Books, 1962-65.

Nadeau, Remi, *City-Makers.* Trans-Anglo Books, 1965.

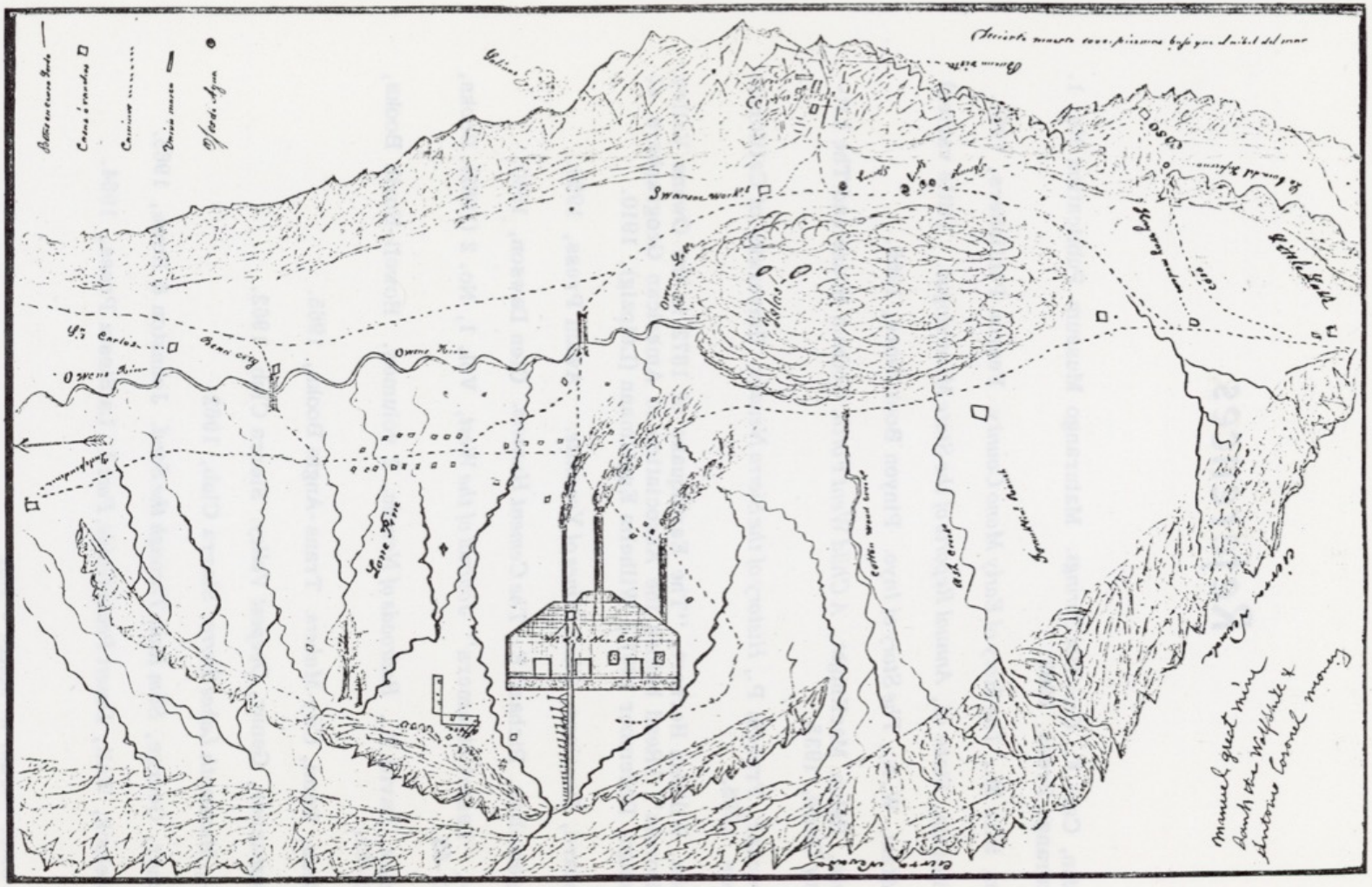
Schumacher, Genny, *Deepest Valley.* Sierra Club, 1962.

——, *Mammoth Lakes Sierra.* Sierra Club, 1962.

Turner, George, *Slim Rails Through the Sand.* Johnston & Howe, 1963.

Wheelock, Walt, *Desert Peaks Guide, Part I.* La Siesta Press, 1964.

CERRO GORDO TRAMWAY AT KEELER - 1959
photo by Walt Wheelock



from the CORONEL COLLECTION, Los Angeles County Museum
copy by Pat Adler

Index

American House, 59
arrastras, 19
Aurora, 8, 9, 27, 31, 42
avalanches, 18, 19, 54

Belshaw, Mortimer W., 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63
Bend City, 42, 43, 45, 46, 49
Bennett, Thomas Jr., 21, 23
Bennettville, 18, 21, 22
Benton, 25, 27
Bessie Brady, 61-63
Beaudry, Victor, 59, 63
Beveridge, 44
Big Horn Spring, 49
Big Meadows, see Bridgeport
Bishop Creek, 31
Blind Spring, 25, 26
Bodey, William S., 25
Bodie, 9, 15, 25, 31
Bonanza Gulch, 47
Brady, James, 61
Bridgeport, 9, 15, 16

Camp Independence, 42
Carson & Colorado R.R., 26, 27, 46
Carson Valley, 15
'Chris', 15
Chrysopolis, 42, 43, 45
cinnabar, 39
Clover Patch, 25, 26
Coso, 37
Coso Co., 9, 45

Dana Meadows, 23
Death Valley, 37
Dogtown, 15, 16

earthquakes, 46
Elder, Abner B., 57, 59

Fat Hill, see Cerro Gordo
floods, 42
Flores, Pablo, 57
'49'ers, 7
Fremont, John C., 41
French, Darwin, 37
Fresno Co., 8

George, 'Capt.', 38
Goodyear, W.A., 45
Great Sierra Wagon Road, 22

Hanna, Tom, 19
Homer District, 17
Homer Mining Index, 18, 21
High Sierra, 51
Hot Springs, 25, 42
Hunter Canyon, 51
hydraulic mining, 16

Independence, 46, 53
Independence Creek, 56
Indians, 23, 27, 43
Indian District, 25, 26
Inyo Co., 49
Inyo District, 41
Inyo Mtns,, 42, 57, 62

Kearsarge Peak, 56
Keeler, 67

Lake Canyon, 17
Lake District, 29
Lake Mary, 34
Little Lake, 37
Little Pine, see Independence
Lone Pine, 41
Lone Pine District, 58
Lundy, 17, 22
Lundy, William, 17

Mammoth City, 33, 34
Mammoth Lakes, 29
Mariposa Co., 8
Mazouka Canyon, 41, 46, 47
Miller Spring, 62

MINES

Alabama, 53
Arctic, 55
Banner, 26
Bay Queen, 17
Big Horn, 51
Black Eagle, 47
Boomerang, 55
Bonanza, 17
Brown Monster, 45
Burgess, 51
Calliope, 43
Cerro Gordo, 49, 57, 58, 59
Chilula, 51
Chrysopolis, 43

Cinnamon, 51
Cliff, see Kearsarge
Comanche, 26
Cornucopia, 26
Creekside, 26
Crystal Lake, 19
Diana, 26
Eclipse, 41,43,45,46
Ella Bloss (—#2), 23
Eureka, 26
Gold Standard, 51
Golden Era, 43
Golden Queen, 23
Golden State, 56
Gorilla, 17
Grand Prize, 17
Gray Eagle, 17
Great Sierra, 21,22
Gunsight, 37
Ida, 41,45
Iron Sides, see Burgess
Josephine, 38,39
Karrick, 26
Kearsarge, 53,56
Keystone, 56
La Despreciada, 65
Last Chance, 17
Laura, 51
Laurel, 26
Lisbon, 33
Little Emily, 26
Lost Cement, 29
Lucky Mortan, 17
McAvoy, 51
Mammoth, 29,31,33
May Lundy, 17,18
Montano, 51
Mountain Queen, 26
Mountain View, 55
Olympic, 43
Parrett, 19
Phoenix, 26
Prosepine, 43
Reward, 45
Rex Montis, 54,55,56
Romelia, 43
San Antonio, 51
San Benito, 65
San Felipe, 63,65
San Jose, 39
Santa Maria, 65
Sheepherder Lode, 21,22
Silver Cloud, 43
Sinnamon Cut, 16
Sister, 56
Tower, 26
Union, 41,43,45,57,59,63,67
Vega, see Gold Standard
Virginia, 56
Wai Wera, 26
Whiteside, 47
Wild Rose, 26
Winoshilk, 38
Wolverine, 17
Ygnacio, 65

Mollie Stevens, 62
Mono Co., 8,9,41
Mono Lake, 9,15,19,27
Mono Trail, 23
Monoville, 15,16,29,42
Moore, Maggie, 59
Moore. Lt. Tredwell, 23

Nadeau, Remi, 61
Naval Ordinance Test Station, 39
New York Butte, 49,51
Norst, Cord, 15,16

Onion Valley, 53,55,56
Owens Lake, 37,61
Owens River, 9,16,38,42
Owens Valley, 15,41

Pierce, R.T., 19
placer mines, 16
Prescott District, 23
Pumice Mountain, 29
Randall, Dr., 29
Reddy, Pat, 39
Russ District, 41

Saline Valley, 49,51
San Carlos, 42,46
Santa Rita Flat, 46
Selby Smelting Works, 26
Sherwin Grade, 31
Sierra Nevada, 7,22,41
Stevens, Sherman, 62

Taylor, E.S. 'Black', 23
Taylor Springs, 26
Tioga, —Pass, —Crest, 21,22
Townsend, 'Lying Jim', 18,22
Travis, Lola, 59
Tulare Co., 8,38,49
Tuolumne Co., 23
Twin Lakes, 31

Virginia Creek, 15,16
Visalia, 43

Walker Pass, 9,41
Walker River, 15
waterwheels, 31
Wells Fargo Company, 26
White Peak, 25,26
Winnedumah, 45

Yosemite National Park, 22,23

Mary DeDecker has lived in Independence since 1935. In between her explorations in the eastern Sierra, she has poked into the remote corners of this fascinating region, both on foot and by jeep. Her main interest has been botany, though she has been sidetracked by an interest in mines and mining.

In between, she has found time to raise a family of two daughters, serve as president of the Eastern California Museum and to work as a title researcher for the Title Insurance and Trust Company's Inyo Office.

Here is the story of those mines located on the eastern slope of the great Sierra Nevada and in the arid stretches of the Inyo Mountains. After the first frenetic rush of '49 played out, miners drifted back of the crest to look at the country that they had blindly scrambled over. So in 1857, the mining activity of the eastern Sierra started, to continue until the present day.

Included are stories of mystery mines, such as the Lost Gunsight, over toward Death Valley, and of the Lost Cement Mine of the Mammoth Lake region.

Directions are clearly given, to allow the present-day prospector of the history lode to locate these century-old mines. Included are photos, sketches and maps, both of this day and those made by engineers and miners a hundred years ago.

$3.50

La Siesta Press